The heart of Mission San Juan Capistrano is the Central Courtyard, with its open-grass lawns, rose-lined pathways, and beautiful fountain in the center. Yet, the normal and beautiful sight was not always present. In fact, the garden atmosphere did not exist until 1935. The courtyard and its purpose have evolved over the Mission's 237 years of history.

The rectangular shape or the quadrangle design of the Mission courtyard was very typical of the missions in California. The four buildings surrounding the inner courtyard: the North, East, South, and West Wing buildings were not completed until about 1796, some 20 years after the Mission was founded.

It is difficult to imagine the courtyard as anything but beautiful, yet in 1796 the courtyard was simply an open dirt working area. With approximately a thousand people living at the Mission at that time, the courtyard was a bustling place where many people were working outside in the courtyard, preparing wood for carpenters, shearing sheep, spinning wool, working leather and making transportation food supplies from the storerooms to the outdoor kitchen for meal preparation.

The courtyard served as the heart of mission life until 1934, when Mission San Juan Capistrano was secularized. The Mexican government, which had won its independence from Spain in 1821, took over the mission system.

Soon after the diocese of secularization, or the ending of the missions, the land holdings of Mission San Juan Capistrano were divided up and sold to 20 prominent California families. By 1845, Governor Pio Pico even sold the Mission itself.

The Mission was sold at auction to John Forster, Governor Pio Pico’s brother-in-law, for $710, when it was valued to be worth more than $50,000. For the next 28 years the Mission was a private recreational property of the Forster family. According to local oral tradition, during the 1860s and 1870s John Forster hosted entertainment such as bullfighting in the central courtyard for the rancho community.

During the Forster family’s stay from 1845-1869 and after the Mission’s return to the Catholic Church by President Lincoln in 1865, many of the buildings surrounding the courtyard grew up, most likely in need of repair and maintenance. By the 1880s, the North and West Wing buildings were built, replaced by those in the mid-1890s. Father O'Sullivan rebuilds the North Wing building on the original foundation to serve as a Catholic school and housing for the teaching. 

After the completion of the newly built North Wing building, Father O'Sullivan commissioned a large fountain to be installed in the Central Courtyard. It was hand crafted by local artist Roger B. Sherman of Laguna Beach. Father O'Sullivan requested the fountain have carved designs of the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and thereby naming it the “Fountain of the Four Evangelists.” The fountain was completed in 1930, and landscape design was underway.

Ever since the completion of the landscape gardens in 1930, the courtyard has served as a center of cultural and spiritual renewal. In many ways, the Central Courtyard has become the heart of Mission activity once again as guests explore the grounds. Although landscaping has changed since the original design of the 1840s from visual contrast of new plant life against the backdrop of historic architecture remains inspirational to artists and guests alike.