



California Inspiration

Ruth Bancroft's Garden

BY SURUCHI MOHAN

Ruth Bancroft's legacy is not only her visionary garden but the organization launched to preserve it.

THE OLD ENTRANCE through the dark sea-green Folly takes visitors past a rare Torrey pine (*Pinus torreyana*) that looks much older than its 40 years. Though winter temperatures often drop below freezing and the soil is heavy clay—not dry and sandy like in its native San Diego—this tree is thriving, owing to the steely determination of Ruth Bancroft, who originally planted it in her eponymous garden in Walnut Creek, California.

From the new entrance by the visitor center at the other end, guests can see

Top: Shape, texture, and color are artfully blended in these mixed borders of cacti and succulents that line a pathway in the Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek, California.

agaves, some with 30-foot inflorescences, that dominate the beds mixed in a symphony of colors and shapes. Further down, toward the Folly, are cacti—columnar, barrel-shaped, or branching—that break the monotony of the prevailing upright rosette habit of the succulents, as intended. “When I started to plan this garden and I had all the succulents back here, I thought I needed

cacti for contrast, so I started buying them,” she told researchers recording an oral history in the early 1990s (see note below). “You know, all the succulents seemed to be all the same one or two shapes.”

Bancroft, who turned 105 last September, is no longer able to do any gardening. However, pushing the boundaries of plants that can grow in this Mediterranean climate region, with its spikes of high and low temperatures, has earned Bancroft a permanent place in the annals of American horticulture. Hers is not the typical American garden, with boxwood hedges, azaleas, and

Editor's note: Because Ruth Bancroft is no longer conducting extensive interviews, many of the quotes attributed to her in this article are derived with permission from “The Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek, California: Creation in 1971, and Conservation,” an oral history conducted in 1991 and 1992 by Suzanne Riess, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1993. http://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/bancroft_ruth.pdf.

lush green lawn. Rather, through her exploration of the forms and textures and sun-and-shade requirements of xerophytes, she has introduced to the gardens of Northern California plants that were not previously considered typical ornamental fixtures.

“The whole garden is a surprise in that the major components are dryland plants—not conventional garden plants, although [they are] now becoming much more popular, thanks in part to Ruth’s influence,” says Antonia Adezio, a founding director of the Garden Conservancy, a national nonprofit dedicated to preserving important American gardens, and now a consultant in organizational development in Sonoma, California. “This was a huge departure at the time from what was more commonly seen, even in California.”

It is not just the dry garden for which Bancroft is known. In the 1950s, she began the cultivation of irises that still grow outside the main house. Even today, her irises generate interest because many of these cultivars are no longer available in nurseries (see sidebar, page 26).



Garden creator Ruth Bancroft, shown here in 1992, traced her love of nature to childhood.

“Ruth approached gardening with intellectual curiosity,” says horticulturist Richard Turner, a former director of the Ruth Bancroft Garden, Inc., and former editor of *Pacific Horticulture* magazine,

who has known Bancroft since 1978. “She was thinking, experimenting with what could grow on the property...and flourish in Walnut Creek.”

Bancroft can also take indirect credit for inspiring the establishment of the Garden Conservancy, which this spring is celebrating its 25th anniversary (see sidebar below). As a result of this effort to preserve private gardens for posterity, the Ruth Bancroft Garden was opened to the public in 1992. Today, it boasts a visitor center and offers educational programs, plant sales, and docent-led tours.

EARLY LIFE

Bancroft’s early years offer insight into the arc of her life. As a child, Ruth Petersson often collected polliwogs. After they sprouted a pair of legs, she put them in one container and in another when all four appeared. When they became frogs, she released them into nature.

This childhood curiosity about the natural world drove many of her activities. The daughter of a professor of Latin at the University of California in Berkeley and a for-

THE GARDEN CONSERVANCY’S FIRST PROJECT

In February 1988, on a trip to California, the late noted plantsman Frank Cabot visited the Ruth Bancroft Garden. As Cabot drove away, he commented to his wife, Anne, that he had to find a way to preserve such magnificent private gardens. “Anne replied facetiously, ‘Why don’t you start a Garden Conservancy?’” Cabot related in the introduction to Bancroft’s oral history.



Ruth Bancroft’s garden inspired the creation of the Garden Conservancy.

The following year, on March 4, 1989, the first Ruth Bancroft Garden Committee meeting was held under the auspices of the Garden Conservancy. With that began the legal process of moving the garden from private to nonprofit status and photo-documenting the beds. The year 1994 saw the completion of the transfer of the property to a new nonprofit entity, the Ruth Bancroft Garden, Inc., which became the owner of the garden. The Conservancy received an easement, ensuring that the land will never be put to other use. Bancroft retained lifetime ownership of the seven-and-a-half acres on which stand her house and gardens. Since taking on the Bancroft Garden project, the Conservancy has helped an additional hundred gardens throughout the country and celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. —S.M.

AN ENGLISH GARDEN OF EXTRAORDINARY IRISES

Ruth Bancroft learned about irises from the best. As a teenager, she hung out with Sydney B. Mitchell, an iris breeder and author of *Iris for Every Garden*, in his garden at Berkeley, she recounted in her oral history. He hybridized his plants aggressively and sometimes gave Bancroft surplus irises to grow on herself.

When Bancroft and her husband moved into her current home in 1954, she planted a rose, herb, iris, and border garden, creating an English garden with annuals and perennials with gradations in height and different flowering seasons. She planted torch lilies (*Kniphofia* spp.) of dissimilar heights and colors, which bloom in the winter, when the garden is dull. *Echium*, with its tower of red flowers, golden bamboo (*Phyllostachys aurea*), and Mexican weeping bamboo (*Otatea acuminata*) were planted around or a little distance from the kidney-shaped lawn. Near the garage, a few years later, she created a patch of succulents. But it was the 200-foot-long iris border along the old driveway, with pineapple-guava trees and a lone, gigantic, prolific persimmon tree sharing some of the beds on the other side, that stunned visitors. When all of these bearded irises were in bloom, they looked like a Vincent van Gogh painting.



Bancroft's 200-foot border of bearded irises contains heirloom cultivars no longer available elsewhere.

"She organized her iris border according to what satisfied her eye," says Richard Turner. "She had an image of how iris should be grown and followed the recommendations of the best iris growers."

According to curator Brian Kemble, every year she dug out a third of the irises in September, the end of the growing season. She turned the beds, added manure, compost, and bone meal, cut the green leaves back to four inches long, and divided the rhizomes. A few weeks later, she planted them in groups of three plus one extra—should one not survive—putting them back in the same place to preserve the color scheme. Her gardener now follows the same routine. Any leftovers are considered surplus and sold.

The Historic Iris Preservation Society loves to buy them. "The Ruth Bancroft irises are very rare," says Laetitia Munro, commercial source chairperson, in Newfoundland, New Jersey. "They are primarily the older varieties, some are from noteworthy hybridizers, and they all are quite beautiful." —S.M.

mer school teacher, Bancroft "spent a lot of time wandering around, just looking at wild flowers," she said in the oral history. "Then I'd bring pieces home to plant and try them. Some grew, some didn't. Later I found that there are such things as annuals and no wonder they didn't survive."

In 1926, at a time when less than 10 percent of women went to college, Bancroft entered UC Berkeley to study architecture, one of only two women in her class. She had wanted to major in landscape architecture, but it was a new department and her parents were opposed to it. Then, in 1929, came the Great Depression and she left the university. "It was a bad time," she recounts. "The boys couldn't get a job, so I couldn't." Later, she went back and graduated with a teacher's certificate in 1932.

On a blind date, she met Philip Bancroft, Jr., a Harvard art and philosophy major, who was helping his father run the family's 400-acre walnut-and-pear orchard in Walnut Creek. In 1938, the two married and moved into the smaller of two houses



Bancroft is shown here in the early 1970s with nursery owner Lester Hawkins, who helped design her gardens.

on the property, known as the Swiss Chalet. Philip was the grandson of publisher Hubert Howe Bancroft, who donated his substantial collection of the history of the western United States to the library at UC Berkeley that bears his name.

Although Bancroft moved only 16 miles away from her childhood home in Berkeley, it was a world away in climate and soil. Walnut Creek was warmer, colder, and drier than Berkeley, with heavy, poorly draining soil. As she developed into a gardener, Bancroft always kept those differences in mind.

In the beginning, she planted only annuals and perennials. In 1954, owing to her mother-in-law's health problems, she and Philip Bancroft moved with their three children into the larger house. The ornamental gardens around the main house were laid out at this time (see sidebar, above).

CREATING THE GARDEN

In the 1960s, the winds of change were blowing around the Bancroft orchards.

The City of Walnut Creek rezoned the land from agriculture to residential, leading to higher taxes. By 1971, the Bancrofts were forced to sell all but 11 acres of the land. The Bancroft houses and gardens occupied seven-and-a-half acres. Philip Bancroft gave the remaining three-and-a-half acres to his wife to grow whatever she fancied. She set to work planting a dry garden.

Never having laid out a garden herself, Bancroft sought out Lester Hawkins, who was co-owner of the Western Hills Rare Plant Nursery in Occidental, California, to design her flat acreage. He designed the beds, the paths, the lily pond, where the shade house would go. Bancroft had rock and gravel brought in from nearby Mt. Diablo. The paths in the garden were so narrow that material had to be wheelbarrowed in. It took months. She amended the soil and planted furiously, working from sunrise to sundown.

“Everything I planted, I’d look up and try to get an eventual size. It wasn’t always correct, but I’d always look it up to try to leave enough space and then fill in with the small things,” she said.

Her meticulous research coupled with her training in architecture are visible everywhere in the garden. With the foxtail agave (*Agave attenuata*) and century plant (*Agave americana*) providing stunning architectural elements, she wove in *Echeveria gibbiflora*, aeoniums, sedums—low tapestries of densely planted color that bloom at different times of the year.



A deep freeze in December 1972 caused Bancroft’s lily pond to freeze over and killed many of the garden’s succulents. Bancroft had special covers designed to protect tender plants in future.

“She understood the development of space,” says Turner, “how to plant so spaces, views, vistas would materialize. She had learned the design process, which could be applied to any medium.”

Ever the intellectual risk taker, she experimented with the ecology of the garden as well as the shape and color of plants. By design, many of the aloes that have brilliant orange and red flowers—such as *Aloe ferox*, *A. arborescens*, and *A. mudenensis*—bloom in the winter, when the overall landscape is dull, keeping hummingbirds in the garden.

Bancroft was concerned with foliage and form, with flowers merely providing “frost-

ing on the cake,” says Turner. Additionally, “so many succulents have leaf arrangements of spiral or rosette. That rosette pattern is repeated throughout the garden and gives it a sense of unity. This was revolutionary.”

Color and structure aren’t the only components that unify the garden. Charlotte Blome, who was garden manager at the Ruth Bancroft Garden in 2010, says the use of the Mt. Diablo rock tied the garden together. “There was no distinct line between bed and path; there was an organic, naturalistic feeling about it.”

The rules and expression are Bancroft’s own, resulting in a garden that reveals her personality, say those who have known her. She followed her own predilections, arranging plants in ways that pleased her, regardless of prevalent trends of the times.

PUSHING THE LIMITS OF CLIMATE

By September of 1972, the planting was complete. In December, temperatures fell into the 20s and stayed there for several days. Much of the newly planted garden was destroyed and the lily pond froze over. Disappointed but undaunted, Bancroft set about replanting the following spring. But having learned from the experience, she decided to cover the plants to protect them from frost. Thus began a long, painstaking process of covering delicate plants with plastic sheeting mounted on wooden frames. Over the years, as plants grew, so did the size of the covers, with some becoming extremely large.

Visiting the Garden



Lush borders surround Bancroft’s home.

Ruth Bancroft Garden 1552 Bancroft Road, Walnut Creek, CA 94598. (925) 944-9352. www.ruthbancroftgarden.org.

The garden is open Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission: Adults \$10, seniors (65+) and students (with ID) \$7, children (under 12) free (\$5 for group tour). As a participant in the American Horticultural Society Reciprocal Admissions Program, AHS members with a current AHS card receive free admission.



Brilliant red-flowered *Aloe x spinosissima* and the more demure white flowers of a manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* sp.) grace the winter garden.

The garden flourished over the next two decades. Trees stretched into the sky, cacti produced blossoms on spiny stems, yuccas pierced the air with their sword-like leaves, and the flat garden, where everything used to be visible from one end to the other, was thrown into relief. Sometimes the growth produced too much shade, leading Bancroft to move plants around as her garden matured. With her penchant for pushing the limits of the climate and soil the flora could endure, Bancroft had planted the tropical Australian bottle tree (*Brachychiton rupestris*), the trumpet vine tree (*Tabebuia impetiginosa*), and the silk floss tree (*Ceiba speciosa*) in California's Mediterranean climate. These last two yielded an abundance of pink flowers year after year, despite a change in habitat.

In 1990, along came another winter with temperatures dipping into the 20s. Many aeoniums and aloes died. Brian Kemble, curator of the Ruth Bancroft Garden, estimates that they lost about two tons of aloes, some despite their cov-

ers. "But do we want to stick only to safe choices and cut out the many wonderful things?" Kemble says. "No, we don't. Our mission is to introduce choices that are a bit more tropical than would grow here."

FAR-REACHING INFLUENCE

In 1990, John Fairey, creator of the Peckercreek Garden in Hempstead, Texas, was introduced to Bancroft. As she took him around the garden, he "commented on several of her agaves and she offered to dig them for trialing in my Texas garden," he says. "These plants have grown, produced numerous pups, then bloomed and died."

But Bancroft has influenced even dabblers, who may never have heard her name. Although at the time she was creating her garden, climate change with its attendant drought conditions was not on any agenda, her plant choices seem visionary now. Much of the country has experienced drought in the past few years, with conditions especially troubling in California. Drought is now seen not as an aberration but as a given. Consequently, desert

plants are all the rage in gardens around the state. As water becomes increasingly scarce, homeowners are reducing the size of their lawns and replacing them with plants that need less water to thrive, just as Bancroft did decades before.

STILL CREATIVE AT 105

Because of ambulatory problems, Bancroft now hardly ever goes out into her beloved garden. But ever one for using time well and engaging her creativity, she has embarked on a new project. She's organizing her incredibly large shell collection—drawer upon drawer of every imaginable shape arrayed on the long table and buffet in her dining room—that she gathered from Bolinas, California. She arranges them in shadow boxes—sea stars with conch shapes and sea cucumbers and mussels. As with her garden, this collection will serve as a legacy of her long and fruitful life.

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