

Newsletter of
THE GARDEN CONSERVANCY

Preserving America's exceptional gardens

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Botanical Gem in Transition



Western Hills Rare Plant Nursery and Garden, located in western Sonoma County about sixty miles north of San Francisco, is revered by many for its internationally acclaimed collection of rare plants. It includes, for example, what may be the oldest specimen of a Japanese zelkova tree on the West Coast, one of many once-rare plants that Western Hills has made known more broadly.

The nursery is also a magical spot: three acres of flowing landscapes rich in color, texture, and excitement within a majestic redwood forest. Dan Hinkley, founder of the Heronswood

...an “iconic destination nursery, which gained an international following for its remarkable collection of rare and unusual plants.”

Sonoma County Press Democrat
March 12, 2010

nursery in Kingston, Washington, called Western Hills “his personal mecca.” He noted that “there is a realness and trueness and originality to the place.”

The garden collected people as well as plants. Betsy Flack, the Garden Conservancy's coordinator of West Coast programs, first worked at Western Hills thirty years ago and is currently doing volunteer work there. She says that the garden became not just a collection of botanical wonders, but also “a salon where people gathered to talk about the world through plants,” discussing topics as diverse as poverty, economics, politics, and the arts.

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Marion Brenner



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Unfortunately, Western Hills is now in foreclosure; its future is in question. The Garden Conservancy is actively seeking partners interested in participating in an effort to save this important garden.

Western Hills is the creation of Marshall Olbrich and Lester Hawkins, who inspired a generation of gardeners to take an interest in new and unusual plants, many of which they introduced into cultivation in North America. The garden is a three-acre collection of trees, shrubs, and perennials, created to fit the rolling topography of the coastal foothills with manmade features of pond, rills, and meandering pathways. Beginning in the 1960s, it became a destination for gardeners from northern California, around the country, and other parts of the world to learn about rare and unusual ornamental plants and innovative garden design. Olbrich and Hawkins took a special interest in plants suited to cultivation in the Mediterranean climate of California's north coast.

Robert Stansel and Joseph Gatta acquired the garden in 2007 with the hope of establishing it as a public garden and educational resource for the region. They continued to operate the nursery and open the garden to the public. The Conservancy designated it a "preservation assistance garden" in 2007 and has helped sustain the

garden while developing a preservation strategy. The goal is to ensure the garden's long-term preservation, ideally as a public garden, managed by a nonprofit organization organized for this purpose.

The foreclosure of the garden in early 2010 creates a renewed level of urgency. The sidebar on the right suggests some ways to get involved. Please contact the Garden Conservancy if you can help.



History of Western Hills

1959 Marshall Olbrich (d. 1991) and Lester Hawkins (d. 1985) purchase three acres in Occidental to grow their own food.

1960 Olbrich and Hawkins establish Western Hills Rare Plant Nursery. For thirty years, they open their doors to remarkable horticulturists, gardeners, and designers worldwide, nurturing the next generation of gardeners.

1991 Garden continues to flourish and mature under careful watch of Maggie Wych, who inherited the property.

2005 Property put up for sale.

2007 Robert Stansel and Joseph Gatta acquire the garden with the hope of ensuring its future.

2010 The property is under foreclosure.

What's happening now

Friends of Western Hills formed to preserve the garden.

The Garden Conservancy is seeking supporters to secure ownership of the garden and to operate it eventually as a public garden.

To date, the Conservancy has supported:

- A winter horticultural internship in 2009 to help develop a maintenance plan for the garden
- Creation of a garden map of important plants and the buildings, paths, and bridges
- A tree survey and assessment, with the generous support and expertise of Ted Kipping
- A volunteer team of horticulturists, gardeners, and designers that has worked many hours this past year—weeding, pruning, correcting safety issues, and addressing maintenance
- Nomination of the garden for the Historic American Landscape Survey. The Conservancy has also sought funds to document fully the garden's history as an important garden.

What you can do

- If you would like to receive e-mail updates, please send your e-mail address and phone number to info@gardenconservancy.org. Enter Western Hills as the subject.
- Inform people you know who might be financial supporters or interested in the garden's sale.
- Check www.gardenconservancy.org for periodic updates.

Other Distinguished Garden Properties for Sale

Harland Hand Memorial Garden El Cerrito, California

The finest example of the work of artist and garden designer Harland Hand (1922-1998) was perhaps his own half-acre garden on a steep, rocky slope in El Cerrito, with a view of San Francisco Bay and its famous bridges. At the time of his death, the Garden Conservancy was



working with Hand to determine the feasibility of the garden's preservation. Now, for the second time in two years, the property is on the market. Visit www.harlandhandgarden.com for photos and information. Contact: Carl Damerow, Alain Pinel Realtors, 415.816.2631.

Historic Cedaridge Farm Bucks County, Pennsylvania

For twenty years, these twenty acres served as the outdoor studio for garden writer and photographer Derek Fell. Often open for Garden Conservancy Open Days, the rural property an hour and a half from New York City includes themed display gardens, meadows, woodlots, and a natural stream and pond. It is adjacent to parkland and deed restricted against development. Contact: Derek Fell, 215.766.2858.



Berry Botanic Garden, Portland, Oregon

The home and garden of plantswoman Rae Berry (1881-1976), this 6.5-acre garden in downtown Portland is known for its rare and endangered native plants. It features rhododendron, lilies, primula, and rock garden plants, as well as a Douglas fir forest with trillium and other Oregon natives. Persistent financial difficulties are forcing the nonprofit organization that has operated the garden since 1976 to place it on the market. Visit www.berrybot.org. Contact: Dunthorpe Properties, 503.675.3800.



John and Penelope Maynard Garden, Bedford, New York

Pepe and Page Dickey, both garden designers, cofounded our Open Days Program in 1995. Ever since, John and Pepe Maynard's eight-acre garden has been a highlight on our Open Days calendar. The Maynards developed their garden over thirty years. Garden areas flow among rock ledges and oak woods on a steep slope, linked by carefully built rock walls. This "gardener's playground" was featured in the Westchester County *Journal News* last November. Contact: Dianne Weber, Houlihan Lawrence, 914.232.5007.



Pam Proctor Garden, Englewood, New Jersey

Also on the market is a very private garden refuge expertly created over fifty years by Pamela Proctor and her family. *The New York Times*, *Horticulture* magazine, and other media have admired this small, narrow lot (about a third of an acre) within walking distance of downtown Englewood. The garden features a wide variety of conifers, many of which are dwarf; about 150 varieties and hybrids of rhododendrons, including azaleas; and woodland trees, shrubs, and flowers on three terraces, each with a small lawn and pond. Contact: Diane Clarke at Prominent Properties Sotheby's International Realty, 201.637.2133.

