

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WALNUT CREEK, CA:

Ruth Bancroft, beloved founder of the world-renowned Ruth Bancroft Garden, passed away Sunday, Nov. 26th, at her home in Walnut Creek, California, at the age of 109.

Ruth Bancroft was a collector and skilled plantswoman who created numerous gardens around her home, the most notable of which became a public garden and plant nursery.

Born in Massachusetts and raised in Berkeley, where her father was a classics professor at the University of California, Ruth developed a love of plants as a child that would last a lifetime. She studied architecture at UC Berkeley, but the stock market crash in 1929 brought dim prospects of finding work as a female architect, so Ruth completed a home arts degree and became a high school teacher. She met Philip Bancroft, Jr. on a blind date, and the two married in 1939. Ruth moved to the Bancroft family's 400-acre pear and walnut farm in Walnut Creek, where she and Phil raised three children.

Ruth was immensely curious about the natural world, and she spent most of her life studying the world around her. When her children were young, she began collecting shells on family trips to Pescadero, carefully documenting each species and the date and location where it was collected. She then created striking displays of like species, arranged to highlight the subtle differences between them. A large part of her collection was donated to the California Academy of Sciences, which found great value in its documentation of changes in species distribution and size over time.

In the 1950s, Ruth began amassing plants and creating the gardens that still exist around her home, including a lawn and perennial border designed by well-known landscape architect Ted Osmundson. Other gardens dating from this time include the Herb Garden, Rose Garden, Rock Garden, and the Iris Walk, featuring bearded iris cultivars from the 1940s - 1960s. Each garden was focused on a particular plant collection, giving Ruth unlimited opportunity to grow, observe, and compare species. She spent countless hours recording the details of her gardens - planting dates, nursery sources, maintenance, and hand-drawn maps of each garden bed.

In 1972, Ruth began her final garden on the site of a former walnut orchard. Lester Hawkins, co-founder of Western Hills nursery in Occidental, designed a series of garden beds and paths for Ruth to plant using her extensive collection of potted succulents. She mounded and amended the flat, clay soil to emulate the growing conditions of many succulents. When a hard freeze killed most of her new plantings that first winter, she continued undeterred, replanting her garden the following spring. "Ruth didn't dwell on failure; rather, she learned and adapted. She was very forward thinking in her approach to gardening and to life", said former Executive Director of The Ruth Bancroft Garden, Becky Harrington.

Over the decades, the succulent garden matured into a study of contrast, color, and form. Ruth was frugal in her approach to gardening - she mostly planted 1 gallon and 4" plants, giving them space and time to grow. The result is a layered garden that is rich in texture, with bold swaths of color and areas of incredibly intricate plantings. Long-time Garden Curator and close friend Brian Kemble says, "Ruth had a great eye for garden design, the art of arranging plants to create unique compositions. But beyond this, she was awed by the plants themselves, thinking

of each kind as a near-magical product of the creative expression of Mother Nature. She never tired of discovering new ones, and easily got carried away with collecting all the endless variations to be found in a genus. There was a joy in the way she related to plants which will always stay with me.”

Ruth’s garden inspired the formation of the Garden Conservancy, and in 1989 it was selected as its first preservation project. The Bancroft family donated the succulent garden to the nonprofit Ruth Bancroft Garden, Inc., and a conservation easement was applied to the garden property, the first such case of a garden being preserved through an easement in North America.

Former Garden Manager Charlotte Blome describes Ruth’s garden as “an adventure...original, fantastical, and always experimental. Ruth’s garden is a masterpiece - right up there with Monet’s Giverny and Lester Collins’s Innisfree. It is a deeply personal and original exploration of plants, place, and garden design, patiently evolved over decades.”

Ruth quietly continued to manage and work in her gardens until her retirement at age 97. When asked by long-time friend Susie Newcomb what gardening for so many years had taught her, Ruth replied simply, “Patience.”

Ruth was deeply admired by those who worked with her, and she will be remembered fondly by her community. Her garden inspired generations of visitors, as well as the many hundreds of staff members and volunteers who have worked over the years to secure a vibrant future for the garden. It is a momentous time for The Ruth Bancroft Garden - construction is underway on a first-time Visitor and Education Center.

Ruth was predeceased by her husband Philip, sister Doris Dillon, brother Robert Torsten Petersson, and grandson Joseph Dickerson. She is survived by her children Peter Bancroft and wife Barbara, Nina Dickerson and husband John, Kathy Hidalgo and husband Loreto, and grandchildren Kris Hidalgo, Kim Hidalgo, Erika Hidalgo and Philip Dickerson and wife Truc.