

# STEP-DOWN GARDEN

THIS HALF ACRE NEAR  
SAN FRANCISCO CONTAINS INFINITY

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAMELA HARPER



Remarkable gardens are the rule in a state that is itself a garden of sorts. But no other garden in California compares with Harland Hand's half acre. A designer, artist, and craftsman, he has taken a mundane material—two hundred cubic yards of concrete, to be exact—and transformed it into something magical. Inspired by granite formations in the Sierra Nevada, he chose concrete as the only available, affordable material capable of being sculpted to similar effect. With it, he constructed hundreds of paving slabs, fifteen seats and ledges, nineteen pools, and over two hundred boulderlike steps. A natural look was achieved by avoiding large unbroken surfaces, straight lines, geometric curves and angles, flat surfaces, and regular shapes.

Hand's house is entered on the upper level. From the windows a spectacular view of San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge takes precedence over the garden clinging to the hillside below. Go out onto the balcony, down a wrought-iron spiral staircase, and the garden unfolds before you like a Japanese scroll painting.

In the Sierra, chaparral contrasts darkly with gray granite. Hand's garden was envisaged as a similar mosaic of dark and light, embellished with brightly colored flowers. Stepping-stone paths wind between islands of trees and shrubs, leading into twelve paved areas, or "rooms," on different levels. Some are open to sun, wind, and the view; others are secluded. Of the many seats that furnish them, no two are alike. Some are simple and boulderlike; others, combinations of seat-pool, seat-planter, or seat-parapet. Pools are equally varied, some used singly, some in

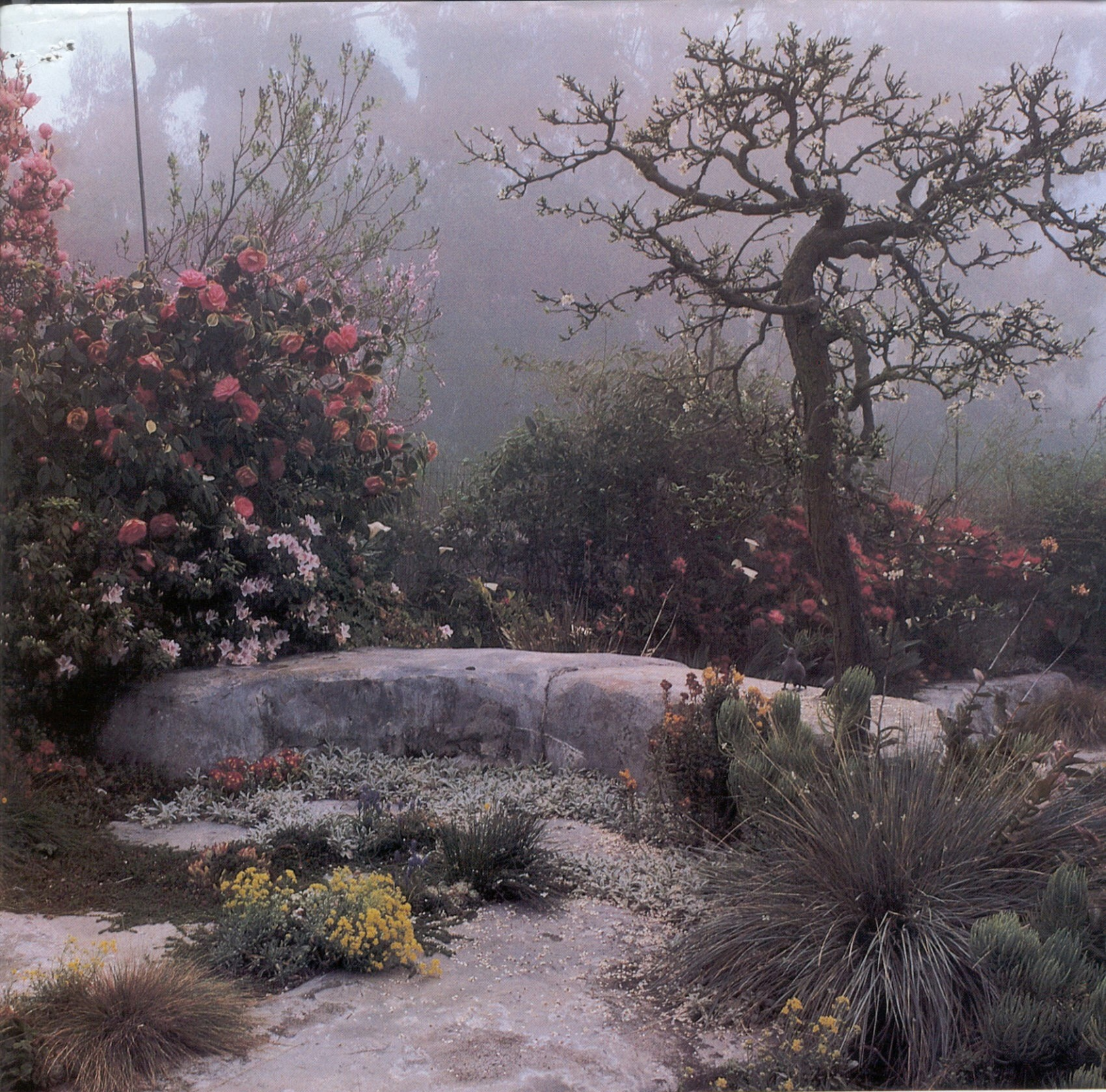


Left: A rose and a rare *Dudleya brittonii*

groups of two or three. One is precipitously poised at the brink of a twelve-foot cliff.

Progress through the garden is slow. At every step, there is something to see, touch, hear, taste, smell; or a different mood to experience as you pass from shelter to open bluff, from sun to shade, from brilliant color to quiet grays and greens. The garden has rhythm; one thing flows into another; you never just walk.





grow among natural rocks and concrete. Above: One of the garden's "rooms," filled with morning mist flowing in from San Francisco Bay.

Hand is not only a designer and artist; he is also a plantsman and traveler. Every garden cranny is crammed with plants, an eclectic collection from many lands. Orchids tumble over boulders; forget-me-nots, violets, freesias, and miniature daffodils grow in the paving; wisteria and clematis intermingle on a driftwood pole. Two plants with furry gray leaves—lamb's ears (*Stachys byzantina*) and mouse-eared

chickweed (*Cerastium tomentosum*)—are used in quantity, stitching the seams between structures and softening contours. Some plants are rare; others, commonplace but used in original ways. A dry stream of blue-green, pebblelike hen-and-chick rosettes (*Echeveria*) flows across a slope, in it a sculpted heron fishing.

This garden fits no established pattern, follows no rules. Most who visit are en-

chanted. A few, schooled in traditional Western design, leave puzzled. In mood it is more nearly Japanese than Western. Perhaps, to understand it fully, one must go to the mountains, there to marvel at nature's imitation of Harland Hand's garden—or so it seems. □

*Pamela Harper writes about gardens and photographs them.*