

# How I Began to Garden and Began Again

by Marjory Harris

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"I should see the garden far better," said Alice to herself, "if I could get to the top of that hill: and here's a path that leads straight to it—at least, no, it doesn't do *that*—" (after going a few yards along the path, and turning several sharp corners), "but I suppose it will at last. But how curiously it twists!"

*Through the Looking Glass,*  
Chapter 2, by Lewis Carroll

Do you remember how Alice went through the looking glass and found a garden of live flowers up a hill? Well, the same thing happened to me, in a way.

In 1979, I was with a friend who sold real estate, on the way to visit a mutual friend. The real estate friend said she wanted to stop briefly at a house that had just been listed for sale. I nodded apathetically, having given up hope of ever being able to afford a house in San Francisco. We drove uphill on Los Palmos Drive. The winding road and colorful stucco houses reminded me vaguely of the

towns that dot the Mediterranean. Although I didn't notice any palms, I couldn't miss seeing the huge Tasmanian blue gums (*Eucalyptus globulus*) which loomed over the house for sale. They formed a double row along the steep dirt trail that ran along the side of the property, a city "street" quaintly named Lulu Alley.

I fled through the ugliest kitchen I had ever seen to the back door, then down the back stairs to the "garden." There was a little concrete pad out back, between the house and a retaining wall that supported a near-vertical escarpment, the remainder of the lot. I gazed skyward at the towering blue gums and inhaled their aromatic vapors with pleasure. I trod through their slippery droppings to a redwood gate in the retaining wall, ascended a short flight of steps, and set upon a steep cobblestone path that wound upward through a thicket of giant milkweeds and coarse junipers.

At the top of this treacherous path was the first of three redwood struc-

tures, with brick pavements and flat flower beds. The second one was walled with ivy-covered lattice, forming a kind of secret bower. The third immediately enchanted me: a structure 59' wide that spanned two levels. A flight of wooden steps deposited me on a large herringbone-brick terrace surrounded by weedy flower beds. Enclosed by redwood fences on three sides and lattice on the side facing the house, three stories below, it was a world of its own.

My real estate friend stood at one end of the terrace, shaking her head as in "My God, what a mess!" I stood at the other end, by the burned foundation of a toolshed, in ecstasy. I turned to my friend and said, "I'm going to buy this place," and started downhill.

It was an odd-shaped lot less than 25' across the front at the street, but 59' wide at the top. The garden ran for 80' from the back of the house to the back fence, but rose around 30' from the concrete retaining-wall to the top terrace. It had lots of possibilities. It also had lots of trees—40—and lots of bushes and weeds.

A month later, as I filled six garbage bags with wet blue gum debris, all the while fighting off wild blackberry vines that reached through the lattice to tear at my clothes, I began to wonder if I was crazy to think I could reform this derelict. With the ignorance of the novice gardener, I assumed the only way to turn the jungle into a garden was to clear it all out and begin from bare ground.

I hired a young man who worked like a dog for days, removing the dead trees, coarse shrubs, blackberry brambles, ivy, and things he claimed

were weeds. I insisted he leave the wild rose and montbretia, both of which I later had to tear out, as they took over all available space. He said, "This is a lot of land here," as in "She's crazy to think she can manage this herself." He warned me about watering the ground once it was stripped of herbage. I asked what he meant; he replied cryptically, "Weeds."

One day while he and his friend were hacking with mattocks at the weeds cemented in the clay soil, I prepared to plant my first outdoor plant—a bougainvillea. I was dolled up in a caftan and long dangling earrings that kept getting caught in the caftan every time I bent over. Using a crummy shovel purchased at a discount place, I started scraping at the clay. After much labor and tripping repeatedly on my ankle-length garment, I made a hole big enough to drop in the bougainvillea. A week later I moved it to another location, ignoring the advice in my gardening book about the touchiness of bougainvillea roots. It soon succumbed.

Later I adopted a more suitable (if less attractive) gardening costume: English rubber gardening boots, a T-shirt and jeans with a loose tent dress over all. The dress makes a useful apron for weeds; dirt shakes off; pants thus last longer. I also began to keep notes on what I planted, with a big red "C" for bad results ("Croaked").

On weekends I visited nurseries and filled the trunk with plants. I soon abandoned my plan to grow easy, low-maintenance plants; I had to have flowers—violets from my childhood playing in the woods, foxglove

and poppies from my sojourn in England, and anything else that would fit in the trunk and was expected to survive in San Francisco.

Ten dead trees had been removed, but the remaining 30 needed pruning. I called Ted Kipping, Tree Shaper, who lived in the neighborhood and whose advertisement I liked. Ted showed up around ten o'clock at night and examined the trees with a flashlight. He said, standing on the terrace and looking downhill, "This would be a terrific place for a rock garden," and asked if I was interested in rock gardens. I remembered the slope beside the house I grew up in, which had some rocks in it and a few plants, and said, "Yeah." He encouraged me to go to the Santa Cruz arboretum on an ARGS Western Chapter outing.

At Santa Cruz a tall, distinguished-looking man approached me and asked in a resonant and cultured voice, "What kind of car do you have?" I told him. He then said, "Would you take a painting to El Cerrito for me?" By then I felt I had humored this character enough, so I said, "Excuse me if I sound rude, but why the hell should I?" He answered that he would show me his garden. It turned out I was talking with Harland Hand, whose article on the color garden in the Spring 1978 issue of *Pacific Horticulture* was on my night table. I read it often between trips to nurseries to buy more flowering plants.

The next day I went to El Cerrito with the painting of twenty-two zebras by a pond of water hyacinth in a pink desert (which I was tempted to keep, so much did I like it). After

seeing Harland's garden, I was deeply depressed. I wondered how I could ever approximate the beauty of space and color he had created on his steep slope with its view of San Francisco and the Bay. Of course, if I had had some of the elixir from Alice's magic bottle, I may have been able to see, nine years later, Harland laboring on my steep slope, installing a new garden.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. In the years that followed, I got involved with horticultural societies, seed lists, study weekends, and other *indicia* of plant mania. "Rock plants" (whatever that means) particularly interested me, as I could fit so many of them in a small space. And so many of the small plants from the world's seaside cliffs and mountain ranges do well in the cloud forest climate of San Francisco's fog belt. But the little delicacies I acquired soon disappeared under the hail of antiseptic leaves and capsules from the giant blue gums of Lulu Alley, or they succumbed to the cold and dampness of the cloud forest floor.

I nagged the street department until they got fed up with my pestering and took out the trees—a feat which inspired my neighbors with awe about my supposed clout at City Hall. Once the blue gums were gone, I built a scree. First I dug a pit three feet deep—no mean feat in clay soil—and around five feet wide. My plan was to fill the pit with gravel, then place stones atop the gravel to create a pleasingly contoured slope. This turned out to be an arduous task that spanned two years. In the meantime, neighborhood cats flocked to the area and fertilized it, saving me

the expense of buying leaf mold. The scree was surrounded by small plants that did not need to grow in gravel, and this area soon became the "jewel box" of the garden.

Over the years I learned that clay soil is a graveyard for plants here unless and until it's thoroughly worked with compost; that large damp and shady stretches are ideal to grow weeds that will soon overpower the rarities I grew from seed or acquired from nurseries or friends; and that weeds grow all year in San Francisco. And I learned that no matter how hard I toiled, my garden still didn't look right and never would without divine intervention.

Such intervention came, as it often does, in a most unusual form, the savings and loan crisis. In early 1988, a colleague asked me to work on a huge federal lawsuit involving a failed savings and loan institution. Because of six-to-seven-day work weeks and a drought, I couldn't do much gardening, but the extra money I was making inspired me to ask Harland Hand to develop a design for reconstruction of my garden. My intention was to keep the design in a drawer like a secret treasure and daydream about someday redoing the garden. But the idea burgeoned into action; before I could get cold feet, I announced to Harland that we would begin the reconstruction in June.

We chose the theme of a village ruin. Harland would recycle the old brick and cobblestones from the paths and terrace to suggest the remains of a village near an ancient, imagined castle. Although the plan looked schematic, I felt confident if anyone could conquer my steep

slope, it was Harland, whose own garden descends a hill. Later he said mine was the steepest garden and one of the most difficult he, and maybe anyone else, had ever done.

Although I was dissatisfied with the results of nine years of labor, tearing up the garden—and particularly the terrace, with its mossy herringbone brick—was a heartache. Harland did agree to leave my nine-year-old double wisteria (I said very firmly, "It has to stay."). He insisted that my lovely weeping *Myoporum parviflorum* had to go, as it would be right in the workers' way.

For several weekends I dug and potted up as many plants as I could, assisted by two German girls. I lost at least a thousand plants, but managed to save a good part of my *Aquilegia* collection, many *Dianthus* and thyme cultivars, and various sempervivums, bulbs, lilies, and groundcovers. The scree plants, with their three-foot-long roots, could not survive transplanting.

I hired a foreman and a crew of Laotian refugees. A few days before May 31, 1988, when the crew was to begin tearing out the redwood structures and brick paving, Harland called to say I should plan on spending fifty percent more than we had discussed—"Just to be on the safe side." I thought I would hyperventilate. As it turned out, the garden cost twice as much as the new, "safe side" amount.

May 31 arrived, and although I could hardly breathe from anxiety over the estimated cost, we began. I was the general contractor. Two days later I had to fire the Laotians, and I started scrounging around for labor-



ers who understood English. The foreman came up with some recovering drug addicts, eager to learn a trade and earn some money, and I located some students needing summer jobs.

A man I called about diamond-cutting the concrete wall offered to do cut-and-fill with a bobcat tractor. It would save months of hand-terracing the clay soil, but it would be expensive. And terrifying. I would look out the window at the bobcat, perched at a treacherous angle, mauling the earth. I would look down at my checkbook and agonize over rising costs, relapsing addicts, and the red dust from the bone-dry clay soil swirling through my house and office.

Over the next several months, at least thirty-five tons of Sonoma fieldstone were delivered, some of the stones transported from the curb to the site by bobcat, others by hand, board, and wire sling. Tons of cement, gravel and sand were stored wherever we could find flat spaces. Redwood debris and clay soil were periodically carted to the dump. A used cement mixer droned, when it wasn't down for repairs. Several times a week I journeyed to lumber yards or contracting supply houses to buy tools, gloves, wire, whatever Harland and the foreman said was needed. And always more cement.

The federal case had me away from my home office a number of days a week. I would come home at night, put on my English rubber gardening boots, and make my way up through the steep mounds of dirt to see what had been accomplished in my absence and to water the remains of my former rare plant

collection in their weed-choked pots. I would call Harland, by then home in El Cerrito recuperating from his labors, and query the latest cement and cobble outcroppings. The fittle walls did not appear on the plan, which I would unfurl and study, trying to imagine how the schematic outlines would end up looking "in the flesh."

Harland would walk around the dirt mounds each morning, rapt in thought, studying the earth and deciding where to free-form the churning cement. I would sit at my desk and wring my hands as I studied the endless river of bills and compared it to the trickling stream of my accounts receivable. In July one little mound outside my office was finished and Harland said I could plant it. It was my only garden for a long time, and I would look out my office window at the small mound, planted with ferns, Asian violets, *Digitalis* species, *Streptocarpus*, and Corsican mint, and feel hopeful.

Harland finished the rock and cement work by the end of August, but there was much carpentry work remaining. The fences had to be rebuilt and a pergola for the wisteria erected at the highest level. None of the crew, including Harland, had ever built such a structure, so it had the air of an experiment. The finished product, when viewed from the front gate, three stories below, made me dizzy. But Harland was always saying how great artists and designers understand that beauty is imperfect and irregular—or something like that.

As summer drew to a close, I thought there was hope of getting the garden planted before the rains

began. We were in a severe drought and no one could predict when, or for how long, we would have rain. But I was propelled by fear of the weeds that would turn the ground green after the merest spritzing, so during lulls in the federal case, I planted. By the end of October, I had planted almost all the transplants, which had estivated in pots, plus several hundred accessions from near and distant rare plant nurseries, and my new seedlings. Where I didn't plant, I sprinkled seed.

During my two-month planting spree, the irrigation people trampled the earth, mangling minute gentians and other just-planted treasures, invisible to them, as they laid tubing for the misting system. Electricians were here for days, hooking up three-way switches for the lights and waterfall. Neighbors stood on the sidewalk, gaping as they gazed up at the waterfall tower and the dizzying pergola. I wondered if it would ever be finished.

Winter came, and for the first time in my gardening career, I was able to weed during our rainy season. There was always some dry patch of concrete I could stand on without fear of compacting the wet soil. I no longer had to lie down on a near vertical slope to get to the weeds in the rockery—they were now elevated on mounds accessible from the stairways that wind through the garden.

Now, as I climb the thirty feet upward from the concrete retaining-wall yard to the wisteria pergola, I pass ponds, benches, bogs, scree, and little "rooms" with concrete and brick benches, and hundreds upon hundreds of flowering plants. Sometimes I sit in my secret garden, at one

end of what was the terrace, and imagine that the concrete cherub who sits at the side of the rectangular pond, dangling his feet in the water, might take flight, out towards San Bruno Mountain and the San Francisco Bay. But why would a cherub want to leave an enchanted garden of live flowers, ablaze with all the colors of the rainbow, a little Wonderland up a hill? I know I don't.



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Photos by the author.