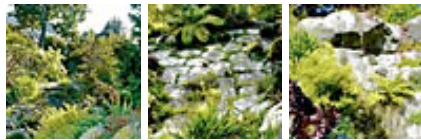


# Harland Hand made the most of a hillside with a view

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[Alice Joyce](#)



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The artistic legacy of artist and teacher Harland Hand lives on in the rich horticulture and unique hardscaping of the garden he created in El Cerrito.

Before his death in 1998 Hand engaged in a process of transformation, sculpting the steep half-acre hillside to the rear of his home into a numinous environment enlarged by sweeping views of San Francisco Bay.

Designed and constructed over a span of more than four decades, the Harland Hand Memorial Garden demonstrates the imprint of its creator as an inventive colorist with a zeal for plants. Even more emphatic is the garden's spatial layout -- a surprising landscape given definition by Hand's use of concrete to alter the verticality of the site.

Contouring tons of concrete as though it were malleable clay, Hand established terraces, connecting stairways and stepping stones to guide visitors around the garden's ponds, benches and planters -- also, all of concrete.

Initially Hand turned to concrete because it was inexpensive. Never aiming to reproduce stone, he instead recognized the sculptural potential and distinctive qualities of the material to structure and amplify the garden plan.

Hand's close friend, Marjory Harris purchased the property just over a year ago. In the past Harris nurtured another garden designed and constructed by Hand at her former residence in San Francisco.

Harris looked to Hand as a mentor, and over the years their conversations attuned her to his philosophy regarding aspects of light, color and form in the garden.

That friendship inspired Harris to take on the role of garden steward for Hand's most personal creation. For support, Harris brought in Bob Hornback as chief consultant, and garden curator Martin Grantham, who propagates rare plants and tests new varieties.

Thus far, Harris estimates she has planted at least 1,000 new specimens. Recently she rebuilt the second-floor balcony, and now the garden extends up onto the deck with a container grouping of alpine species planted by John Tsutakawa.



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The balcony affords a knockout overview of the garden and its vistas, while a spiral staircase directs visitors to discover the nuances of the garden's winding scheme.

Entering the garden you glimpse petite echeverias crowded in among agaves, aloes and variegated yucca preening in a sun-drenched position. A succulent once uncommon in cultivation, Aeonium arboreum 'Zwartkop,' with brazen maroon rosettes, is considered a signature plant in Hand's repertoire.

In this area of the garden where sculptures of pink cranes hold sway and late-afternoon light floods the scene, Harris recalls, "Harland wanted everything to glow here."

Harris shares Hand's passion for succulents. And she is partial to brugmansias, Japanese maples and vines -- contributing fine varieties to the palette of plant material.

One unusual angel's trumpet (*Brugmansia vulcanicola*) with shell-pink flowers grows beneath a *Magnolia grandiflora*. "I think 'brugs' go well with the foliage of maples," Harris says, pointing out a collection of unusual maples uniting red, orange, and white and green variegated foliage.

Follow the garden's progression of paths, moving from one level to the next,

and you advance among garden rooms differentiated by color, into hidden alcoves and around a total of 21 ponds.

These ponds play host to tree frogs; it seems the marshlands of the East Bay help sustain El Cerrito's thriving population.

During an annual mating ritual, large numbers of the frogs convene at the Hand garden. Perched on the leaves of water lilies, males broadcast a croaking call late into the night, luring females to come lay their eggs.

Continue exploring the garden and you happen upon visual tableaux anchored by bold plants: The architectural shape of a dasyliion emerges, followed in turn, by a vigorous chalice vine with lustrous leaves and flaring flowers.

Numerous fruit trees and shrubs are massed with ornamentals to screen the perimeter and fend off deer.

Plants with deep-emerald leaves like boxwood grown in a tree form help to unify the garden. Hand chose tranquil foliage as a foil for showy flowers such as white cymbidiums. Generous sprays of orchids mingle with tree ferns selected for their tropical character.

Punctuating the plant groupings are red azaleas, leading Harris to recall that when Hand began planting in 1954, water was less scarce and there were fewer people.

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Harris integrated many cupheas into the garden, and expects new color forms to arise once the plants hybridize. "They do beautifully all over and are very easy to propagate in cool, damp soil," she says. "I take a cutting, make an angled hole with my finger, then plunge it into the soil near the mother plant. "

Looking about, one can discern countless bulbous species producing a thematic effect. A prominent zigzag pattern emerges from the repetition of blue agapanthus -- Hand's way of introducing a cool note amid shocking pink camellias and red and pink azaleas.

Rejecting hard and fast rules, the design plan audaciously pairs orange and pink flowers, and in sharp contrast, a yellow-green breath of heaven (Coleonema) acts as a unifying plant.

Hand's indelible interpretation of plant marriages proved to be in sync with the designer's rare dexterity in shaping space. Together these traits orchestrate the magic of a visionary's garden.

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How to see it

-- The Harland Hand Memorial Garden in El Cerrito is open to the public several times a year.

To be notified of future open days, contact Marjory Harris by e-mail at [handgarden@earthlink.net](mailto:handgarden@earthlink.net).

On May 19 the garden will be open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. as part of the Garden Conservancy's Open Days program. A \$5 admission fee benefits the Garden Conservancy and a local charity. . -- A.J.



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