

Quarryhill Botanical Garden: Preservation in the Pleasure Grounds

by Benjamin Whitacre



NESTLED IN one of California's famous wine regions, Quarryhill Botanical Garden combines the beauty of the Sonoma Valley with one of the world's most acclaimed collections of temperate Asian flora, which includes many endangered species.

The naturalistic plantings sprawl over the steeply sloping 25-acre site, a former stone quarry that has been converted into a garden with ponds and waterfalls. While the collection focuses on Asian plants grown from seeds brought back from Quarryhill's plant-hunting expeditions, the inclusion of North American species such as tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) with their closely related Asian counterparts demonstrates the botanical alliances between regions of the world that have similar climates.

Since the garden's founding in 1987, it has been credited with introducing several previously unknown species and shared germplasm of rare plants with research organizations and other gardens. It features collections of temperate Asian flora, which includes many endangered species. The rose collection earned Quarryhill a spot in the Great Rosarians of the World Rose Garden Hall of Fame in 2011 for its juxtaposition of 40-foot-tall wild roses with selections of their historic and modern hybrids.

"Visiting Quarryhill is an intellectual as well as a beautiful experience," says Scot Medbury, president and CEO of **An arching bridge over a waterfall adds charm to this naturalistic garden at Quarryhill.**

the Brooklyn Botanic Garden in New York and advisor to Quarryhill. "The experience of going there is one of enchantment. It's an extraordinary introduction to the breadth of Asian flora and to their conservation status and stories."

Quarryhill's success as a premier conservation garden and a spell-binding visitor destination stems from a combination of Old World connections and American entrepreneurship.

MULTINATIONAL COLLABORATION

The garden's founder and principal sponsor, Jane Davenport Jansen, met Lord Charles Howick in 1986. The heiress to an American fast-food company and the storied British nobleman found they shared a common desire to create arboreta.



Left: An antique rose from the 1800s illustrates the impact of Asian species on rose hybridizing. Right: Quarryhill's world-class magnolia collection includes *Magnolia obovata*.

Soon thereafter, Howick arranged a joint expedition to China between Howick Hall Arboretum in Northumberland, England, the Royal Botanical Gardens Kew in London, and Jansen's as yet-unnamed garden. The plan was for each partner to grow the collected species at their respective sites to see how they would handle different environments.

The expedition also attracted William McNamara, a precocious young UC Berkeley-educated plantsman who had been working for Jansen as a landscape contractor. McNamara paid his own way on the trip and soon after was



hired as the first director of the garden, which Jansen named Quarryhill.

AN ARK FOR ENDANGERED SPECIES

The decision to make temperate Asian species the focus of the garden's collections was rooted in the awareness that many Asian countries, notably China, are undergoing rapid modernization that threatens the habitats of the native flora.

"Many botanists believe that if things don't change, we will lose half of our plant species in 100 years," says McNamara, now Quarryhill's executive director. "We are very concerned with conservation, and I think one of the key roles of botanic gardens is conservation education—making people aware of how important plants are and how threatened so many of them are in their wild habitats."

For McNamara, the cardinal virtue of Quarryhill as a home for Asiatic species is the climate. Summer and winter temperatures mimic the native range of the species growing there, while rainfall patterns are reversed—the Sonoma Valley has wet winters and dry summers. The dry summers prevent introduced plants from becoming invasive, according to McNamara, while the exceptional drainage of the soil on the former quarry site prevents the wet winters from rotting roots.

In addition to providing a safe haven for plants, Quarryhill heads efforts to preserve plants in or near their natural growing range. Its current flagship project focuses on



Garden and sky are reflected on the tranquil surface of the Lower Pond.

Additional Information

Quarryhill Botanical Garden,
12841 Hwy. 12, Glen Ellen, CA 95442.
(707) 996-3166. www.quarryhillbg.org.

- Open all year, Monday through Sunday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., except on holidays.
- Admission: Free to members. Non-members: Adults \$10, students (18 and over) \$5, 17 and under free. Seniors (65+) free on Tuesdays.
- QBG participates in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program. AHS members with a current membership card receive free admission, free parking, and discounts at the gift shop.

Other nearby sites to explore:

Luther Burbank Home & Gardens,
www.lutherburbank.org.

University of California Botanical Garden at Berkeley,
<http://botanicalgarden.berkeley.edu>.

Acer pentaphyllum, a maple species restricted in the wild to a single valley in China. Completion of a planned dam project will soon flood the valley, so without Quarryhill's intervention, the species is in danger of being wiped out. McNamara has worked with Chinese horticulturists to collect seeds of the maple, grow them out in nurseries, and plant them above the projected future water line so they remain as close as possible to the species' native range.

Back at Quarryhill, *A. pentaphyllum* selections thrive as part of the nearly comprehensive collection of maples, serving as a germplasm repository in case of need. Visitors to the garden can admire the tree's beauty at the same time they learn about Quarryhill's efforts to conserve it. Those inspired by the garden's work can even take a piece of it home with them; open-pollinated seeds gathered from the living collections are sold in the visitor center.

"If you've got any interest in plants at all, you must go," says Howick, who still leads the influential gardens and arboretum at Howick Hall. "It is without question the best collection of Asiatic plants in North America. It's a truly wonderful garden." ☞

Benjamin Whitacre is an editorial intern with The American Gardener.