

## GARDEN DESTINATIONS

### Days of Wine, Roses, and Sustainability in Sonoma County

by *Debbie Arrington*

**B**irthplace of California's wine industry, Sonoma County stretches from Napa Valley to the Pacific Ocean north of San Francisco Bay. More than 62,000 acres are devoted to wine grapes. Surrounded by vineyards, the four destination gardens I'm highlighting here are sustainable and water-wise, showcasing plants that thrive in the region's grape-friendly Mediterranean climate.

#### SONOMA BOTANICAL GARDEN

"North Bay has more than 1,700 wineries but only one botanical garden," notes Jeannie Perales, executive director of the Sonoma Botanical Garden in Glen Ellen. From Highway 12, this public garden first looks like a grove of colorful maples and ginkgos tucked behind a vineyard. Its trees lead to a former sandstone quarry—hence its former name, Quarryhill—transformed into a spectacular 25-acre Asian garden.

Grown from seed collected in the wild in East Asia, more than 20,000 plants represent about 1,500 species with a focus on conservation. Considered the largest wild-sourced Asian collection in the West, it almost all went up in smoke in October 2017, when a devastating wildfire burned along the botanical garden's boundaries. A staff member saved the Asian collection by turning on sprinklers full blast.

Such wildfires inspired the botanical garden's second initiative: To preserve the biodiversity of California native plants. In 2023, it debuted a 2,200-foot trail through 22 acres of restored oak woodland and savanna, showcasing hundreds of native species. "Preserving vulnerable California landscape and wildlife along with Asian plants really ties together with the Pacific Rim and our place in the world," Perales notes. It's where West meets East.

The botanical garden also cultivates 12 acres of certified organic cabernet



**Above:** A former sandstone quarry became a forest of Asian trees at the Sonoma Botanical Garden. **Left:** A steel globe, created by sculptor Ivan McLean, is the focal point in the Mediterranean Meadow at Cornerstone Sonoma designed by ornamental grass expert John Greenlee.

sauvignon for production of wine that is sold to support the garden's projects. <https://sonomabg.org>.

#### CORNERSTONE SONOMA

At the gateway to the Sonoma wine region, Cornerstone combines food, wine, and gardens. Folktable, its main restau-

rant, received a Michelin Bib Gourmand award. Its tasting rooms represent boutique wineries. Its gallery of gardens—each with a stunning view of the nearby mountains or surrounding vineyards—showcase innovative landscape design while doubling as event spaces.

"The gardens were originally inspired by the International Garden Festival at Chaumont-Sur-Loire to create a cultural and creative haven, celebrating the connection between art, architecture



**Benziger Family Winery offers guided tram tours of its flower-filled insectaries.**

and nature,” explains Steven Schwager, Cornerstone’s landscaping manager and leader of its garden tours.

Cornerstone’s rose garden is one of 12 American Garden Rose Selections trial gardens nationwide. “Guests who love roses should come visit us in October, when most roses throughout the country are going dormant, and ours are still in full bloom,” says Schwager.

The pollinator garden supports monarch butterflies and hummingbirds. With an ever-changing rotation of photogenic crops, the edible garden demonstrates how to grow vegetables

beautifully year round. The dahlia display, with some blooms as big as dinner plates, peaks midsummer through fall. [www.cornerstonesonoma.com](http://www.cornerstonesonoma.com).

#### **BENZIGER FAMILY WINERY**

Attracting “good” bugs to fight “bad” bugs—and eliminate chemical pesticides—is part of a biodynamic approach to sustainable winemaking at Benziger Family Winery in Glen Ellen. Following integrated pest management and organic farming principles, this technique also builds healthy soil, preserves biomass, and promotes deeper root growth.

“We’ve seen tremendous impacts to the health and quality of our vineyards,” says Chris Benziger, the winery’s vice president and brand manager.

Notched into the Sonoma Mountains, Benziger’s ranch covers about 85 acres—35 under vines. Integrated among Benziger’s vineyards are “insectaries,” sprawling gardens packed with Russian sage, black-eyed Susans, and purple coneflowers that buzz with beneficial insects. “The insectaries create an environment that attracts not only insects, but other animals as well,” says Benziger. “It is the ultimate Zen moment to stop in the middle of one, close your eyes, and be enveloped by nature.”

Guided tram tours explore the insectaries and end with wine tasting. [www.benziger.com](http://www.benziger.com).

#### **RUSSIAN RIVER ROSE COMPANY**

Michael and Jan Tolmasoff make perfume the old-fashioned way—they grow roses, then distill precious oil from petals in an antique copper still for perfume and rose water. “We harvested more than a ton of petals [in Spring 2023] and got three ounces of rose oil,” says Jan. “It’s more valuable than gold.”

In 1976, the couple bought a 15-acre former plum and pear orchard in the Dry Creek Valley. They planted chardonnay and sauvignon blanc grapes, which they sell to boutique wineries. Then, Jan got interested in old garden roses, and Michael became intrigued by varieties used for perfume. After research in Bulgaria (a global perfume industry hot spot), he chose four Damask varieties for the farm: ‘Kazanlik’, ‘Ispahan’, ‘Gloire de Guilan’, and ‘Rose de Rescht’.

“We grow a field blend, which means it mixes together as we harvest,” Jan explains. In May, roses are picked before dawn to maintain their maximum fragrance.

Besides hundreds of perfume roses, the farm includes a nursery, a two-acre display garden with more than 650 varieties of mostly old garden roses, and a 500-foot rose allée with eight massive arches covered with climbers. [www.russian-river-rose.com](http://www.russian-river-rose.com). ■



**At Russian River Rose Company, the rose allée in its two-acre display garden comes into spectacular bloom in late spring.**

*Debbie Arrington is a garden writer based in Sacramento, California.*