

Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens

California's second ACS Reference Garden

By Sara Malone • Photos by Janice LeCocq

Mendocino County, California is a favorite spot for tourists, with its dramatic coastline, sweeping vistas and thundering waves of the Pacific Ocean; and its iconic stands of ancient redwoods. It is also a great spot for plant lovers, as its climate is exceptionally mild, and the coastal fog mitigates the dry summers. Perched directly on the coastal headlands is the perfect destination for both visitors: the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens, which *Sunset Magazine* recently ranked #2 of best public gardens in the Western States. In fact, the MCBG draws more visitors every year (over 71,000 in 2013) than any other attraction in Mendocino County.

We're delighted that MCBG also has a noteworthy conifer collection, and, in late 2013, became the newest member of the Western Region Reference Garden program. While we encourage ACS members to make the pilgrimage individually, we are also happy to report that the Gardens will be part of the September 2015 ACS annual meeting, post-conference tour.



*Mendocino's companion,
the Pacific Ocean*



The Gardens were founded in 1961 by retired nurseryman Ernest Schoefer and his wife, Betty. Attracted initially to the site by its beauty and mild weather, he was also impressed with its ample water supply and acid soil, which provided the perfect conditions for his beloved *Rhododendron*. In fact, the Gardens' first notable collection was *Rhododendron*, reflecting both the unique growing conditions and a resident population of horticulturalists engaged in hybridizing many of the most popular early introductions. Today the MCBG is still known for its extensive collection of these beautiful shrubs and it is one of the few places in the world where every kind of *Rhododendron* can be grown, including many tender species from the cloud forests of Southeast Asia and the Himalayas. Some of these unusual specimens produce the most fragrant blossoms in the Gardens. Every May the MCBG and the Noyo Chapter of the American *Rhododendron* Society host the largest *Rhododendron* show in California, when the majority of the shrubs are in glorious bloom.

Conifers were also part of the MCBG from its beginnings, as the native stands of *Pinus contorta* (shore pine) provide a crucial windbreak to the Gardens from the prevailing westerlies off the ocean. The first efforts involved replenishing and adding to those trees along the shoreline. There were keen conifer enthusiasts among the early supporters, such

as Peter Shick, who established a relationship with John Silva, a conifer expert and botanist in New York. Silva sent scions of rare conifer species to the Gardens, where they flourish today. Shick also collected from the wild and used other contacts to introduce interesting species of conifers from throughout the world, especially from New Zealand and Tasmania, which share the Gardens' mild, Mediterranean climate.

Today, the Gardens' total 47 acres and the conifer collection includes natives, rare and unusual species from the world's temperate regions, and also interesting dwarf and miniature cultivars which are both planted in conifer-centric beds and inter-planted with perennials and other woody plants. About 50% of the Gardens is maintained in its natural state, which affords visitors the opportunity to experience both carefully cultivated plantings and the scenic woodland with towering native trees and lush undergrowth. These 'wild' areas are managed to protect both native flora and fauna.

The noteworthy conifer species in the MCBG collection come from all over the world, and many are now endangered in the wild. The *Dacrydium cupressinum*, endemic to New Zealand, is probably the one, about which most visitors ask, due to its impressive size and unusual aspect. There are some low *Abies fabri* specimens, unusual in that this species usually has a tall upright habit, and two of the three at MCBG are





This is a very special place.

prostrate. Faber's fir is endemic to China's Sichuan Province, and its decreasing population makes it vulnerable in the wild. The Gardens boast a particularly fine *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, an

Athrotaxis selaginoides and a spectacular *Abies pinsapo* var. *marocana*.

There are future plans for expanding and enhancing the Gardens' collection of dwarf and miniature conifer cultivars. Director Mary Anne Payne is an ACS member and a long-time fan: "Conifers provide winter interest in our perennial beds and year-round curb appeal in our problem entry area, which is open to deer, exposed to the reflected heat of the parking lot and is extremely windy. The conifers take the abuse and still look great!" Mary Anne notes that the entry beds are currently being renovated, with additions from her purchases at last year's Western Region Annual Meeting in Olympia, Washington. Not only did she acquire some great plants at the auction, but also took the opportunity to drive up and back to the meeting, stopping at conifer nurseries in Oregon on her return and adding to her haul. "Our goal is to make the entry garden reflect the Gardens' overall collection, as this is the first bed that our visitors see when they arrive, and it's a great introduction to these wonderful plants." There

are also plans to add pathways and conifer cultivars to the North Forest. The Nursery at the MCBG sells a large diverse selection of dwarf and miniature cultivars, many of



Where native greets the visitor.

which can be seen planted in the various gardens.

In addition to the rhododendrons and conifers, the Gardens have significant collections of heaths and heathers, camel-

lias, magnolias and native upland and riparian plants of the north coast. The heaths and heathers collection is recognized by the American Public Gardens Association. There is also an astoundingly colorful dahlia display in autumn.

The MCBG is an extraordinarily vibrant garden, with a strong connection to its community. The large numbers of visitors are easily accommodated in its ample acreage, and it never feels crowded. Its dog- and child-friendly policies mean that, on sunny days, the grounds are peopled with families picnicking and enjoying the beautiful surroundings. This is not by accident; it is a considered part of the Gardens' mission. As Payne says: "We connect people with nature; we're more than just a display garden. There's something for everyone here and the Gardens can be a place of either excitement or solace, depending on what you come looking for." A signature annual event of the Gardens, December's Festival of Lights, is a family-oriented evening when thousands of lights transform the Gardens into a winter wonderland. The spring brings the magnolias and rhododendrons into bloom; the summer the peak of the perennial borders, and the fall and winter the dahlias, heathers and heaths. Throughout the cycle, as backdrop, companions and sometimes scene-stealers, the conifers, endure and flourish. Come visit for yourself—you won't be disappointed!





Inaugurating a Reference Garden: **Conifer Day at the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens**

By Sara Malone

When the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens (MCBG) became the newest ACS Reference Garden, Director Mary Anne Payne decided to celebrate in style. Declaring May 3, 2014 to be “Conifer Day”, Mary Anne, with the help of the Garden’s staff, volunteers, Master Gardeners and the ACS, put on a full day of coniferous activity which drew attendees from all over the Western Region.

Brent Markus of Conifer Kingdom/Rare Tree Nursery made room in his bi-coastal calendar and headlined the event as keynote speaker. He gave a presentation on how to use conifers in the landscape and a survey of what was newest and most exciting in the world of cultivars to standing-room-only crowds. The audience ranged from seasoned coneheads to the newest of newbies, and everyone had the fever. To

illustrate and highlight his presentations, Brent drew on some of the hundreds of plants he had shipped down from his nursery in Oregon to sell to attendees. A veritable feeding-frenzy ensued every time there was a break in the presentations. (This author confesses to playing her part—I went home with a fabulous *Ginkgo biloba* ‘Weeping Wonder’ and a *Pinus banksiana* ‘Manomet’, among others.) The fact that Brent offered discounts on multiple plant purchases only fueled the fire! In addition to the plants from Conifer Kingdom, there were unusual offerings from specialty *Rhododendron* and *Camellia* nurseries.

The rhododendrons, for which the Gardens are justly famous, were in bloom, so that we were broadminded and viewed angiosperms as well as conifers. In mid-May, the MCBG hosts the largest *Rhododendron* show in California, and Mary Anne timed Conifer Day to coincide with peak bloom. *Rhododendron*, and conifer tours were offered throughout the day, led by MCBG docents and gardeners. When not attending presentations, buying plants, or touring, we viewed some of Bob Shimon’s famous bonsai specimens, including a dramatic redwood and a pygmy cypress.

Most of the day’s activities were open to all comers, but the afternoon featured an ACS-members-only tour of the Gardens at Harmony Woods, the special world of ACS members Judy and Bob Mathey. This author gave an introduction to conifers called “Enter the Cone Zone” to those remaining at the MCBG, and, once again, Brent’s plants were put to use as I was able to pull specimens from their pots, demonstrate root growth, and explain proper planting and care. New members signed up on the spot!

The day’s schedule also included the formal presentation of the Reference Garden plaque to the Gardens, comments by ACS and MCBG officers and directors, and a talk on the state of the coastal forests by Greg Giusti, a specialist in forest and wildland ecology and the Lake and Mendocino County Advisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension Program.

When the group returned from Harmony Woods, wine, beer and hors d’oeuvres were waiting and, thus fortified, they set out for an after-hours tour of the Gardens’ conifer collection with Walt Valen and Siena MacFarland. Walt, an MCBG Garden Advisory Committee and Board member, was the Executive Director of Strybing Arboretum (now San

Francisco Botanical Garden) for 20 years and is an avid plant enthusiast. (Note: those of you who join us for the 2015 Western Regional Meeting Post-tour will be visiting his garden, Stoney Bottom, as well as the MCBG.) Siena, one of the staff gardeners at the MCBG, has a particular affection for the conifers and together, Walt and Siena gave us a fun and fact-filled tour. It always feels special to wander in a public place after-hours, especially with refreshment in hand, against the backdrop of the sun slowly sinking into the Pacific.

The day's festivities were capped with a dinner under the tent on the MCBG grounds. Catered by a Mendocino chef with a nod to the audience, the menu included salad with pine nuts and cakes with cone decorations. (It turns out that a previously unappreciated aspect of cones is that, when rendered in icing, they are chocolate.) The tables were decorated with coniferous arrangements, some of which stumped the experts, who, when trying to ID them, failed to notice that the arrangers had glued cones from one genus onto the branches of another!

This marvelous event brought together the most passionate cone-heads from across the Western Region, introduced many of them to the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens, educated, enlightened and entertained all who attended, and sent many of us home with choice additions to our collections. In addition, we made conifer converts out of many who had not yet entered "the cone zone". Brent graciously consulted with the MCBG on the planned expansion of their dwarf conifer collection, insuring that the Gardens will be an active ACS Reference Garden in the future. A smaller band of die-hards continued on the next day, for a train ride through the redwood forests and a visit to Walt Valen's Stoney Bottom Garden in Boonville, California.

If you live near or are involved with an ACS Reference Garden, and you haven't collaborated on an event like this, why not? And, if you're involved in managing an ACS Reference Garden, seek out some ACS members to help you put on an event! Collaborating with our Reference Gardens, other plant societies and organizations such as the Master Gardeners; it is a great way to entertain, educate and attract new members. Using volunteers across the organizations, we keep costs low and provide rich, informative programming. Our Reference Gardens provide great venues and wonderful teaching opportunities, and together we can have fun while carrying out the mission of the ACS.