





A CENTURY OF HANDS-ON BEAUTIFICATION

The Garden Club of Santa Barbara

Story by Matt Katz • Art by Deborah Breedon

Everything is in fine tune at Music Academy of the West in Montecito.

The conservatory's manicured gardens are lush and tidy. Lofty shade trees embrace the aged campus, while ground-level reflecting pools double the impact of its magnificent Spanish Revival architecture. Visitors relax on stone benches or wend their way along brick paths, stopping to take pictures, inspect a flower or breathe the salty-sweet redolence of sea air and seasonal blooms—the scent of Santa Barbara itself.

It is an Eden of high culture, to be sure: a special place in a special city. And with a violin master class in session at Lehmann Hall during the 2016 summer festival, one can't help but feel a sense of timelessness.

But it wasn't so long ago that the gardens of this iconic property, the former site of the Santa Barbara Country Club, were on the road to ruin. By the early 1980s, the Music Academy had sold off eight acres along the western perimeter. Winter storms had toppled specimen trees and taken out plantings around the main building.

Then, in 1983, a casual relationship with the Garden Club of Santa Barbara (GCSB) began to flourish and bear fruit. A loose arrangement was made to exchange meeting space and access to a kitchen for work tending the gardens. And just like that, one of Santa Barbara's most serendipitous restoration projects—one of many spearheaded by the nonprofit GCSB over the last century—was on.

While convening their annual meeting held in Santa Barbara 1926, the Garden Club of America visited the lush gardens at Miraflores, then a private estate. Today Miraflores is the main campus of the renowned Music Academy of the West. The Garden Club of Santa Barbara began tending the gardens in 1983. Since then, club members have planted, pruned and helped fund the renovation of the garden's reflecting pools.



“We have a very special relationship with the Music Academy of the West,” says Alice Van de Water, a 23-year GCSB member who in 2016 wrote the club’s centennial chronicle published in *Noticias*, the journal of the Santa Barbara Historical Museum. “I’ve never seen the papers; it was just an understanding that we would help them and they would help us. And they still do. It’s a long history.”

Indeed, the history goes back to 1926 when GCSB’s umbrella organization, the Garden Club of America (GCA), during its annual meeting, visited what was then an 18-acre estate known as Miraflores, which aptly translates to “look at the flowers.” The alliance has led to a decades-long amelioration of the Music Academy and its grounds, from plantings and pruning and installing a new irrigation system to funding the renovation of the garden’s reflecting pools.

“If it had not been for that collaboration with the Garden Club of America, they would probably still be doing their own gardening, because that place was not always wealthy,” Alice explains. “They have a lot of members now who are donating and making things happen, but we did a lot there.”

Members Cynthia Nolen and Carole Halsted designed the Casa del Herrero Herb Garden Project, which the Garden Club planted in 1995. The club has a long tradition of pruning all the roses and propagating the boxwood hedges at Casa del Herrero, one of Montecito’s historic estates.

“And not just financial help,” clarifies GCSB Archivist Gillian Couvillion. “We are the ones who planted and pruned. We do real work.”

This, I am told, is one of the main differences between modern members and those of 100 years ago, when the Santa Barbara chapter began.

With a raised eyebrow and a wry smile, Norma Jean Shaw, the club’s president from 2014 to 2016, puts it best: “We’re not just a group of stuffy old ladies who wear our finery to meetings. When you join the group, you’re given a green apron—and you use it!”

Founded in 1916, the Garden Club of Santa Barbara (called the Garden Club of Santa Barbara and Montecito until 1968) was the first Garden Club of America to be established in the western United States. Early members included luminaries such as Pearl Chase, who grew up in Santa Barbara and dedicated her life to beautifying the city, and



Helen Oakleigh Thorne, an East Coast socialite who, in 1917, moved into Las Tejas, one of Montecito's oldest estates.

An avid horticulturist, Thorne transformed the property into an eclectic 26-acre wonderland perfumed by the pale purple blossoms of a heliotrope garden. She went on to become a leading light for West Coast conservation, preserving large tracts of redwood forest along the Pacific coast.

But more than a century in, GCA's membership of 200 clubs still leans heavily toward the Atlantic. "If you were to look at a map of all the clubs, you'd see that it's really impacted on the East Coast," says Alice Van de Water. "But there are only 18 in the zone from Colorado to Hawaii."

When it comes to issues of conservation, though, the western contingency's voice provides a weighty counterbalance. Norma Jean Shaw picked up on the environmental fervor at a recent GCA conference in Washington DC. "The western clubs were certainly the most vocal about conservation," she notes.

"Our club is always aware of issues like the drought, and we have a very active conservation committee," says Alice, clarifying the local group's position. "We are ladies who are pretty in tune with the environment and how to improve it."

And ladies they are—all 125 members from the greater Santa Barbara area, including outlying towns like Ojai and Santa Ynez. Although there has never been a policy excluding men, the last one dropped out in 1950.

"Nobody really knows why they left," muses Alice, noting that male horticulturists and nursery

Left – The Wooded Dell garden on the Campbell Trail at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden was designed by GCSB member Lenore Hughes. She incorporated the curve of the historic Campbell Bench designed by Lockwood de Forest as the design motif so the new garden would mimic a curved meandering pathway through the dell.

Above – GCSB members Jocelyne Meeker, Jane Buchanan, Debbie Geremia, Carol Newman, Sharon Bradford, Shirley Ann Hurley, Ladeen Miller and Carol (Puck) Erickson Lohnas after a day of "digging in the dirt" at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden.

owners were among the club's original members. "We think it started after the war, when everybody was trying to get back into normalcy."

Jane Buchanan, GCSB's centennial committee co-chair and a former club president, agrees that it was simply a matter of former military men returning to the workforce. "They were just trying to make a living," she says. "But there are men in some GCA clubs back east, and there's no reason that can't happen here. In fact, currently we have a male honorary member."

In spite of the club's current estrogen imbalance, membership in 2016 is relatively diverse, certainly more so now than ever before. The most striking difference between modern members and their predecessors is a willingness to "dig in the dirt," as Alice puts it, echoing a sentiment I heard from many sources.

"They like to get their hands dirty," compliments Paul Mills, assistant curator of Lotusland, an estate garden in Montecito where the club has held meetings and assisted with various landscaping projects.

The club has also provided financial grants to

this and other historically significant garden sites in the Santa Barbara area, although money doesn't flow like it once did. "Some of the early members were very wealthy," explains Alice Van de Water, commenting on the shifting demographic of the club's roster, "but that was never a requirement. The most important thing was just having an interest in gardening."

Still, there is no escaping the fact that early members not only had an interest in gardening, but also owned some of the finest estate gardens in the nation, including those at Lotusland and Miraflores. And as hands-in-the-dirt labor and historical preservation have grown to supersede white-glove tea parties, these iconic properties have become the focus of much of the club's attention.

"We feel good, as members of the community, that we've helped save some of the large estates that belonged to members," Alice says.

Indeed, the club's conservation efforts tend to merge history and botany. Take, for example, their work on an ancient hedge surrounding the rose garden at Casa del Herrero, a 1925 estate in Montecito regarded as one of the nation's finest examples of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture. (Note: Casa del Herrero was built by GCSB member Mrs. George Fox Steedman and her husband. Their daughter, Medora Bass, also a garden club member, inherited the house from her parents.) Unable to find an exact cultivar, and not wanting to disrupt the historical integrity of the garden, the club managed to propagate the geometrically trimmed hedge and thereby continue its lineage.

"We took clippings of the original and put them in [powdered rooting hormones]," says Alice delightedly. "We discovered that those boxwood hedges—you really didn't have to start them in a greenhouse and baby them along. It's grown to become quite beautiful."

A similar mash-up of botany, history and civic improvement is in play at Mission Historical Park, across from the landmark Old Mission Santa Barbara. One of GCSB's first civic projects took place here in 1919 with the planting of 24 olive trees, a memorial to the men who'd died in World War I. A small plaque nestled in the grove credits the club. But as Jane Buchanan puts it, "The trees don't look very good; they are almost 100 years old and receive very little water. And that is a historic park."

So, the club has embarked on a collaboration with the city to refresh the area with new olive trees, pathways and signage.

The Santa Barbara Botanic Garden (about 1.5 miles north of Mission Historical Park) was the site of two recent gifting projects to celebrate the club's 100th anniversary in 2016. The Centennial Children's Maze, a clover-shaped fantasy of hide-and-



seek designed by local artist and GCSB member Lenore Hughes, is the first of its kind in Santa Barbara and slated to become the property's gateway to an expanded family garden. A second project, the Wooded Dell Garden, also designed by Lenore Hughes, showcases California natives such as *Salvia spathacea* (hummingbird sage) and *Ceanothus 'Ray Hartman'* (California wild lilac), among others.

And the work isn't finished. It never is in a garden. "Our club members helped with the planting of both the Maze and Wooded Dell gardens," says Jane, "and we will continue to volunteer assisting the staff with periodic weeding and pruning. The gardens are only going to get better."

These consistent efforts to continually beautify area gardens usually pay off in a big way. Case in point: Spanish-style Santa Barbara with its red-tiled roofs and whitewashed courtyards covered in climbing bougainvillea was an intentional creation, planned and implemented after the great earthquake of 1925. Residents' willingness to embrace change and implement new designs created the Santa Barbara we know today.

Although GCSB members I spoke with humbly deny a club connection to the city's modern look, early members certainly had a hand in shaping it. Consider, for example, Pearl Chase, who was largely responsible for that recasting of local architecture in the Spanish Colonial style. She also spearheaded the drive to plant trees along city streets, leading Mayor John T. Rickard (1953–1956) to call her a "champion of conservation, good planning, architectural unity and historic preservation"—a close parallel to the Garden Club of America's mission to "promote



Left – Santa Barbara Botanic Garden staff deliver plants while GCSB members plant the maze: Jocelyne Meeker (left), Shirley Ann Hurley (background) and Jane Buchanan, past president and co-chair of the Centennial Committee.

Above and right – Lenore Hughes designed the Children's Centennial Maze at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in the shape of a cloverleaf using native coyote bush hedging. The maze, the first of its kind in Santa Barbara, is the gateway to the Backcountry Adventure children's area.

greater understanding of the interdependence of horticulture, environmental protection and community improvement." Many of the trees planted by the GCSB on Santa Barbara city streets were either grown by seed or tended by members until they were large enough to plant.

Still, some original GCSB members clamored for independence from the countrywide organization. "We garden 365 days a year, ruining our cuticles doing it," said one, contrasting East and West Coast clubs.

To Helen Oakleigh Thorne, however, year-round gardening was a primary reason to align with the GCA. As a native East Coaster, she was mindful of Santa Barbara's uniqueness. The grand dame of the South Coast felt to her like Shangri-La—or, at the very least, a special place in the world: a potential exemplar of gardening and civic beauty.

At a 1920 club meeting to discuss potential secession, among other topics, Thorne urged her fellow members to stay in the GCA, noting that GCSB could work beyond the paradisaical bubble of Santa Barbara and "attain a greater success than one which is purely local and self-centered."



"Your position as gardeners is unique," she reminded them, reflecting on the idyllic combination of growing conditions that characterize Santa Barbara. As Norma Jean Shaw puts it, "This has long been thought of as not only a spectacular location and visually beautiful, but also of having a climate where you can grow anything."

Indeed, it is a place where gardening matters. And as Thorne concluded, she highlighted the singularity of her adopted hometown, elevating it to Elysian heights and opening its doors to the nation at large.

"That great traveling American public is coming more and more to your gardens for inspiration," she said. "The whole gardening world of America has picked out Santa Barbara as its ideal." ♦

