

# THE HOME FRONT

## Growing a Piece of History

How a 103-year-old created one of California's most important gardens

BY JULIA FLYNN SILER

**Walnut Creek, Calif.**  
**RUTH BANCROFT, 103**, sat in the main house of the family compound where she has lived for more than seven decades, gazing in the direction of the unusual "dry garden" she created nearly 40 years earlier.

It's a succulent oasis on 3 acres that uses very little water, a surprisingly exotic island of sculptural desert plants surrounded by suburbia. Mrs. Bancroft's creation was planted decades before either succulents or native low-water plants would become popular. Richard Turner, editor of *Pacific Horticulture* magazine, calls it "one of the most significant private gardens on the West Coast."

Mrs. Bancroft's hope is to preserve the garden. "I'd like to keep it just the way it is," she said.

The Bancrofts once owned 400 acres in the Ygnacio Valley, across the bay from San Francisco. Now, an 8-acre family compound and the adjoining 3-acre garden are all that remain. The pear and walnut orchards are gone, replaced by residential subdivisions. Yet the property remains a small piece of California history.

The main home, built in an eclectic American style and approximately 4,000 square feet, remains largely untouched from the time Mrs. Bancroft moved into it in the 1950s, with midcentury furniture and Asian art on its walls.

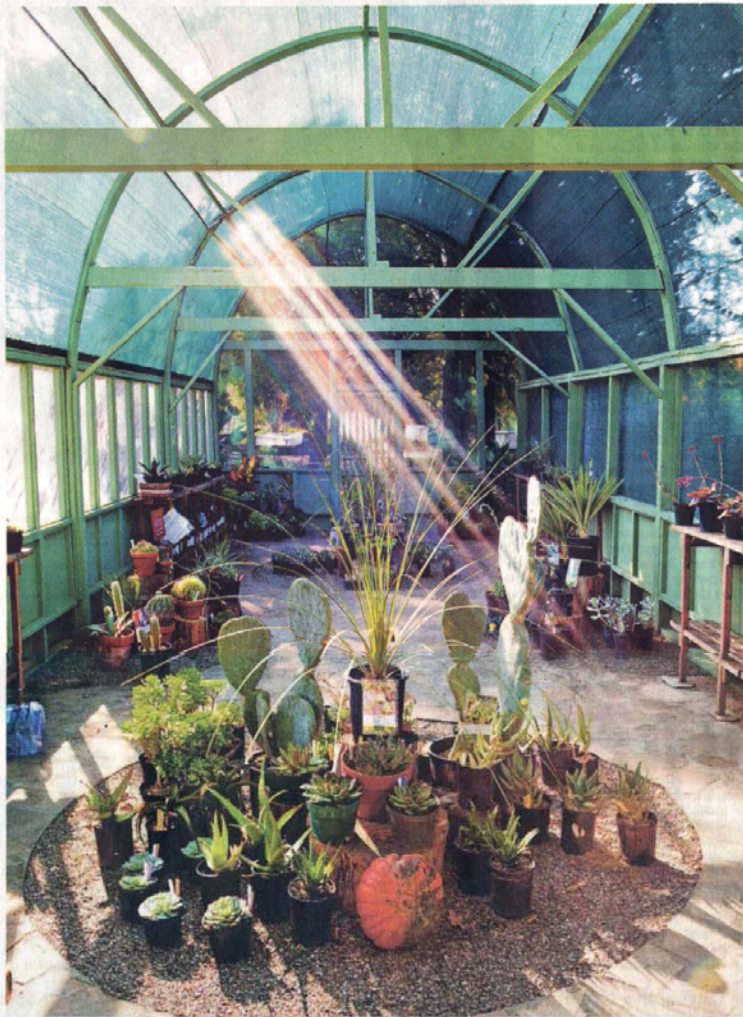
The living room is dominated by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that holds most of her husband's grandfather, Hubert Howe Bancroft's, 39-volume history of California and the West. Most of Hubert Bancroft's large collection of books and other materials were donated to the University of California, Berkeley in 1905. It's now held in the Bancroft Library, named in his honor.

The room which may have the most delightful view in the house is the "plant library"—Mrs. Bancroft's home office, whose shelves are filled with around 4,500 volumes of books on plants. A corner room with windows looking onto the garden, one view is partly obscured by a mature wisteria that was probably planted 80 or 90 years ago, when the house was built.

Born in 1908, Ruth Petersson Bancroft, the daughter of a UC Berkeley classics professor, would wander the open fields behind her family's Berkeley home to collect trilliums and other wildflowers. She met her husband, Philip Bancroft Jr., on a blind date. By the time she arrived as a newlywed in 1939, the Bancrofts' farm in Walnut Creek had already been in the family for more than a half century.

Soon, the young Mrs. Bancroft began doing some planting of her own. She and her new husband were living in a cottage on the property known as the "Swiss Chalet," modeled loosely on an alpine mountain house. Liking color, perhaps to brighten the dark mood of living on a family compound with overbearing in-laws, she filled flower beds with blooms.

By the mid-1950s, Ruth and Philip Jr., who ran the family farm, had moved to the property's four-bedroom main house, built in 1919. Around that time her horticultural interests took a more unusual turn. She bought a few succulents from a Berkeley gardener. Mrs. Bancroft planted these first finds and added other horticultural curios in her gar-



Ruth Bancroft's garden inspired the formation of the Garden Conservancy. Clockwise from above: The greenhouse; the main home, built in 1919; a stairwell leading from the first to the ground floor; a cactus; Ms. Bancroft and her daughter Nina Bancroft Dickerson.

den because she liked their unusual forms. She continued to collect succulents on family driving trips to Southern California, stopping at small nurseries along the way.

Over the years, the family gradually sold off its farmland. The last walnut orchard was chopped down in 1971 and Philip Jr. gave the remaining 3 acres to his wife, for a succulent garden. "She likes spiky and vicious things," joked Mrs. Bancroft's daughter Nina Bancroft Dickerson, 65.

Mrs. Bancroft first began designing and planting her dry garden's desert landscape in 1972. She would start at 8 each morning and work with her hands for long stretches throughout the day. Although she no longer works in the garden, she is still referred to as a "genuine dirt gardener"—someone who did her own weeding and planting.

Her garden inspired the formation of the Garden Conservancy, a national nonprofit devoted to preserv-

ing exceptional gardens. The Ruth Bancroft Garden was its first preservation project. Since 1992, it has been open to the public. Owned by a nonprofit organization, the 3-acre garden charges admission. It normally employs two full-time gardeners and a number of staffers and volunteers, and costs about \$500,000 a year to operate and maintain.

The family's private garden, which was planted long before Mrs. Bancroft's succulent garden and is part

of the 8-acre family compound, is well-tended, with mature plants and fruit-bearing trees. Its lushness is a striking contrast to the younger succulent garden, with its spiky shapes and otherworldly blooms.

Working with prominent nurserymen and garden designers over the years, Mrs. Bancroft spent decades planting and tending both gardens, working in them each day alongside the three gardeners she kept on staff. Over the years, she pursued her passion for collecting unusual specimens. Her favorite plant? "I love them all," she said.

Nina, Mrs. Bancroft's older daughter, said that she and her sister Kathy Bancroft Hidalgo, 59, are determined to keep the property in the family and have no intention of selling. Mrs. Dickerson spent her childhood on the compound and recalled riding her horse through the orchards. "It was a wonderful way to grow up," she said. "Definitely, it will stay in the family as long as my generation is alive. I just don't know after that."

Photographs by Paul Flynn for The Wall Street Journal