Our mission is to preserve this exceptional example of dry-garden design and to continue to develop its collection of water-conserving plants for the education and enjoyment of the public.
Welcome to the Ruth Bancroft Garden. This site was once part of a 400-acre walnut and pear farm dating to the 1880s. The farm was founded by historian and publisher Hubert Howe Bancroft.

In 1939, Ruth Petersson married Philip Bancroft Jr., Hubert Howe’s grandson, and moved to the family farm. Mrs. Bancroft was an avid gardener, and she created a large English-style garden around the main farmhouse, incorporating bearded irises, roses, herbs, alpine plants, and perennials. In the 1950s she became fascinated by succulents and began to collect them.

The Bancroft farm operated until the late 1960s when the land was sold to developers who were expanding the town of Walnut Creek. The last walnut orchard on the property was cut down in 1971, and Mr. Bancroft gave approximately 3.5 acres of land to Mrs. Bancroft so she could plant a new garden.

Mrs. Bancroft, then in her sixties, seized the opportunity. She enlisted Lester Hawkins of Western Hills Nursery to help create the pathways and beds. She then designed the planting layout, creating dynamic combinations by using the contrasting forms, textures, and colors of succulents from her potted collection, which by that time had grown to thousands of specimens. She completed the original planting in 1972.

Mrs. Bancroft continued to design and actively work in the garden until well into her nineties. In 1989, The Ruth Bancroft Garden became the first preservation project of The Garden Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving exceptional American gardens. It has been open to the public since 1992. Mrs. Bancroft passed away in 2017 at the age of 109, leaving this bold dry garden as a testament to her vision.

**COVER PHOTOS**

*Top Row (L to R):* Romneya coultersi, Echeveria agavoides, Banksia ashbyi

*Bottom Row:* Aloe polyphylla, Notocactus roseoluateus, Puya olepestris
BEGIN YOUR TOUR

Notice how the Garden was designed to evoke a natural setting. Plants are grouped and mounded, and there are no edgings to define pathways and beds. Layers of plantings create visual interest and involve the visitor in a journey of discovery that seems far removed from the Garden’s suburban surroundings. The Garden uses plant form, texture, and foliage color to provide interest throughout the year — a dramatic example of how to design a garden with succulents.

Please keep to the paths to avoid damaging the Garden’s small or seasonally dormant plants.

TIPS ON USING THIS TOUR BOOK:

• Scientific names are indicated in black italic print.
• Common names are indicated in bold black print.
• Tour directions are indicated in orange print.
• Self-Guided Tour Map is located on the back page.

Pass through the Garden’s entrance gate next to the Coit Family Visitor & Education Center. Find tour marker 1 at the far end of the bed on the right.

1. At the center of this bed sits the garden’s oldest plant, a majestic valley oak (Quercus lobata). When Hubert Howe Bancroft moved here in the 1880s, his acres of flat grassland were studded with these native trees, the largest species of oak in North America. Most were removed to make way for fruit and walnut orchards, but some, such as this one, estimated to be well over 200 years old, still remain.

The dramatic, powdery blue-gray Agave franzosinii has its origins in Mexico, but the exact location is not known.

From tour marker 1 walk a few yards down the path on the left parallel with Bancroft Road. Find tour marker 2 in the bed on your left.

2. Do these look like palms? They are not — this bed contains a variety of species of tree-form yuccas. Yuccas have sharp, tough, sword-like leaves that come directly from the trunk (if tree-form) or the base of the plant (if shrub-form).

On the opposite side of the path is a clump of puyas, members of the bromeliad family (Bromeliaceae) from South America. Their silvery barbed leaves evoke another member of that family, the pineapple. When in bloom, their prominent flower spikes display blossoms in unusual colors such as blackish purple.

Continue along this path to the next bed, and find the tour marker 3 on the left.
3. The stout-trunked tree to the left at this stop is a **Chilean wine palm** (*Jubaea chilensis*). As the name suggests, wine was made from the sap of this palm, but this required cutting down the palm, which is now illegal in Chile. Notice how the leaves of this palm are different from those of the yuccas at the last marker. Each leaf of the palm is comprised of a series of sword-like leaflets arrayed on either side of the stalk, like a feather—this is called a pinnate leaf. This compound leaf is then attached to the trunk by a leaf stalk.

Many of the plants in the Garden are succulents, that survive drought by storing water in their thickened leaves, stems, trunks, or roots. Others, like the Chilean wine palm, are from Mediterranean climates or other dry regions around the world.

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4. Notice the assortment of aloes in this bed. The Garden includes varieties from Africa, Arabia and Madagascar — all of them characterized by rosettes of thick, fleshy leaves. Leaf edges are frequently toothy and appear in a variety of colors, some of which change seasonally. In winter and spring, a profusion of riotously colored flowers hover above the aloes. **Aloe rubroviolacea**, from the Arabian Peninsula, forms a large cluster in the foreground of this bed. It gets its name from the violet-red hues taken on by the leaves at dry times of the year. Dense spires of red flowers emerge in winter.

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Continue along the main path to the right of marker **3** parallel to Bancroft Road. Approximately 15 yards ahead, find tour marker **4** at the leading edge of the next bed on the right.

5. To improve drainage and create a more varied topography, many tons of crushed rock from nearby Mt. Diablo were added to the Garden in the mid-1970s, evoking the rocky habitats where many of these plants are found in nature. Thanks to this effort, this part of the Garden displays a thriving community of California natives, including **Mormon tea** (a name applied to various species of *Ephedra*), a cone-bearing shrub with needle-like stems known for its medicinal uses, and **St. Catherine’s lace** (*Eriogonum gigantum*), a large wild buckwheat that produces dense umbrella-like heads of tiny pinkish-white flowers in summer and fall.

To the right of the marker sits a clump of deep-green **Agave shawii**, one of only three species of agave that are native to California. On the opposite side of the path, a group of Mexican agaves prominently displays embossed impressions on their leaves, a characteristic of many agaves. This is a result of the leaves unfurling from a central cone, and leaving behind toothy indentations on adjacent leaves.
Continue on the main path a short distance, and stop at tour marker 6 near the small side path that branches off to the right.

6. The tall multi-trunked tree at the far left corner of this bed is a Torrey pine (*Pinus torreyana*), which grows wild only on the coast of San Diego County and on the Channel Islands off Santa Barbara. This fast-growing tree was planted in the 1970s, and like most of the other trees in the Garden, it was planted from a one-gallon container.

In the foreground just behind and to the left of the marker is a clumping aloe with an unusual pagoda-like form. Named *Aloe* ‘Hellskloof Bells,’ this hybrid was created in 1991 through Garden Curator Brian Kemble’s breeding program. The name Hellskloof is a reference to a dry valley in South Africa where one of the plant’s parents originates.

7. The path here is constricted by two interesting plants. On the right is a large shrubby manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* ‘Ruth Bancroft’). This plant is an accidental hybrid produced by parent manzanitas that no longer survive in the Garden. It is distinguished by its especially deep mahogany bark, its height, and its tolerance for summer water. Clusters of tiny white flowers, shaped like little Grecian urns, are produced in winter.

The tree on the left with fine-leaved weeping foliage is a *Melaleuca preissiana*. This native of the coastal area of southwestern Australia displays delicate white- or cream-colored flowers in late summer. It is related to bottlebrush (*Callistemon*), another Australian native frequently seen in the Bay Area.

Find tour marker 8 in the center of the bed straight ahead.

Turn right, and head down the small side path. Find tour marker 7 at the end of this small path, on the right.
8. In the center of this bed are a number of tall plants distinctive for their fountains of long grass-like leaves. This species of grass tree (Xanthorrhoea preissii) from Australia will eventually develop a trunk up to 12 feet tall. From the center of the foliage arises a tall, spear-like flower stalk covered with tiny white flowers.

Turn to the left and follow the path nearly to its end, crossing through a wide intersection. Find tour marker 9.

9. While this Mexican grass tree (Dasylirion longissimum) with its fountain-like form looks strikingly similar to the grass tree at tour stop 8, it is a member of a different plant family from a different continent. When similar traits arise independently in unrelated lineages, this is known as convergent evolution.

Retrace your steps to the wide intersection where the paths converge. Turn left toward the distant tall palms with their skirts of dried leaves, walk a few yards, and find tour marker 10 in the bed on the left.

10. In this part of the Garden are two large trees of distinctly different character that provide cooling shade. On the right near the fence and the green shade house sits a dense-canopied English oak (Quercus robur). On the left is a broad-leaved deciduous tree with leaves that are almost heart-shaped. This is Tilia tomentosa, and its leaves have silvery undersides, so it is known as silver linden in the US, or silver lime in Great Britain. This is an example of how common names can vary by location and may be misleading or apply to more than one plant. Scientific names are therefore important for identifying plants.

The bed in the foreground includes a number of gasteria species. These relatives of the aloe can be identified by their thick tongue-like leaves and their dangling flowers, whose pot-bellied form gives the plants their name — “gaster” is Greek for stomach.

Continue down the path, keeping the distant tall palms on your left, toward the center of the Garden. When you enter into the large clearing, find tour marker 11 on your right.

11. Two tall eucalyptus from Australia stand at either end of this bed. Note the distinctly different bark of Eucalyptus kitsoniana on the left and Eucalyptus cephalocarpa on the right. A hedge of torch aloes (Aloe arborescens) occupies the central portion of the bed, punctuated on the right by a tree-like Hercules aloe (Aloe barberae x A. dichotoma).

Continue straight through the clearing, keeping the clump of medium-height palms on your left and the gray-green pine on your right. Follow the path toward the pine, and find tour marker 12 at the front of this bed.

12. The tall gray-green pine is a single-leaf piñon (Pinus monophylla) native to Nevada’s Great Basin. It is unique among pines for having single
needles, rather than two or more needles joined in a fascicle or bundle, as found in other pines. The left side of the path is lined with blue finger (Senecio talinoidies ssp. mandraliscae) a South African ground cover with finger-like glaucous leaves belonging to the daisy family (Asteraceae).

Continue along the path as it curves to the left, and find tour marker 13 on the right.

13. The spiky green clump in the foreground is one of many kinds of dyckias in the Garden. These plants are characterized by sharply hooked spines edging their stiff leaves, which vary in color by species, and can include green, silver, and purple. This specimen, like most of its relatives, displays large spikes of orange flowers starting in late spring. As the puyas at tour marker 2, these South American plants are members of the bromeliad family.

Continue a few yards ahead, and find tour marker 14 at the base of the large palm tree.

14. The Mexican blue fan palm (Brahea armata) overhead is a beautiful example of a drought-tolerant palm. As in other palms, its compound leaves comprise sword-like leaflets, though these are palmate in form — the leaflets radiate outward from a central point, like the palm of a hand. This palm frames the view back to Ruth’s Folly, the tall wooden gazebo structure that was constructed in the early 1970s by Mrs. Bancroft’s husband, Philip. The Folly marks the original entrance to the Garden.

15. It may seem surprising to find a lily pond at the heart of a dry garden, but this is an important feature of the original design. The pond provides an oasis within the Garden, acting as a cool, shady counterpoint to the frequent heat and sun in the rest of the Garden. This feature is common to traditional gardens in dry climates such as Spain, India, and elsewhere.

The pond is nestled between two piñon pines (Pinus edulis) on the left, and two palms on the right — the bright-green, shrubby Mediterranean fan palm (Chamaerops humilis) and the gray-leafed South American caranday palm (Trithrinax campestris).

Turn to face Ruth’s Folly and walk forward to tour marker 16 in the bed on the left.

16. Along the path is a drift of coral aloe (Aloe striata) from South Africa. The broad, triangular leaves have an attractive orange margin. Heads of coral flowers are borne on 30-inch stalks from mid-winter to early spring.

Tall California fan palms (Washingtonia filifera) toward the center of this bed are the only palms native to the western United States, and can be found in desert oases near Palm Springs. The
**shrub coral tree** (*Erythrina x bidwillii*) to the right of the palms is a hybrid providing a blaze of red flowers in the summer but is cut back to the ground in the winter.

Proceed toward Ruth’s Folly, and find tour marker **17** in the bed on the right nearest the Folly.

**17.** This grouping of **golden barrel cactus** (*Echinocactus grusonii*) in the bed adjacent to the shade house was part of the original garden planting in 1972. These impressive cacti are from central Mexico. The narrow-leaved green shrub beyond these cacti is known as **purple broom** (*Polygala virgata*) for the profusion of violet-purple flowers that cover it in spring. This bed also features specimens of the dramatic **Queen Victoria’s agave** (*Agave victoriae-reginae*) with their striking white markings on sculptural dark-green leaves.

Further along the pathway, this “tapestry bed” is designed to emphasize color, pattern, and texture with a variety of **sedums, senecios, crassulas, and echeverias**. The bed terminates with a stout tree whose distinctly swollen trunk gives it the name of **Australian bottle tree** (*Brachychiton rupestris*). Continue along the path, passing the bottle tree. Find tour marker **18** in the next bed on the left.

**18.** The **Montezuma pine** (*Pinus montezumae*) overhead was planted in 1973 and is a rare example of its type in Northern California. The rest of this large garden bed is dominated by cacti of various species and forms, all native to the Americas. A dry creek bed runs though this bed and toward Ruth’s Folly. It does not actually carry seasonal water but is an important component of the original design concept.

The foreground includes a variety of barrel cacti notable for their rounded shape and robust spines along prominent vertical ridges. Columnar cacti occupy the middle of the bed. Several kinds of **prickly pear** from the genus *Opuntia* form the backdrop. *Opuntia* pads, which are actually flattened stems, are commonly used in Mexican cuisine and are called *nopal* in Spanish. They bear delicious fruit known as *tunas* or prickly pears. The spines must be carefully removed from the *nopal* and *tunas* before eating. Please avoid touching the pads or fruit seen in the Garden.

The green fence to the right of the greenhouse marks the edge of the Garden and is fronted by an assortment of columnar cacti. This is an example of the way in which Mrs. Bancroft sometimes grouped plants for an artistically harmonious visual effect, rather than by plant species or points of origin.

Walk a few yards toward the green fence and find tour marker **19** at the base of the tree in the bed on the right.

**19.** The spreading tree that dominates this end of the bed is a **desert willow** (*Chilopsis linearis*), which grows along stream courses in the deserts of the American Southwest. It exhibits showy lavender flowers in the summer and is not a true willow. Trees providing light shade, like this one does, are important for protecting some succulents that are sensitive to excessive sunlight during the heat of the summer.
Many of the plants in this bed have white silky hairs or spines, an additional strategy for deflecting sunlight and reducing surface temperature in the hot summer months, though their forms vary widely. *Cleistocactus* are medium-height cacti densely clad in fine bristly spines. *Oreocereus* have a dense mat of fine hairs, through which peek prominent yellow-orange spines. The silky hair motif is repeated on the small rosettes of *cobweb houseleek* (*Sempervivum arachnoideum*) covering the ground below.

Further along this bed, notice the green, lumpy masses of *Deuterocohnia brevifolia*. This self-mounding member of the bromeliad family looks as though it is growing on top of a rock, but in fact it takes the form of a living boulder naturally, without support below. A large specimen of *yucca treculeana*, (usually our first yucca to bloom each year), anchors the south end of the bed.

As you join the path adjacent to the green fence, find tour marker **20** in the bed that abuts the fence.

**20.** The spectacular multi-branched cactus adjacent to the fence is from the genus *Cereus*, whose name is derived from the Latin word for “candle,” suggested by its form. It produces white flowers in summer and fall, followed by large edible fruit. At its base is a horizontal tangle of South American cacti with snake-like arms.

In the bed on the opposite side of the path are several more tall examples of *Oreocereus*, described at tour marker **19**. The specimens here are the largest in the Garden.

Continue along the path adjacent to the green fence for approximately 25 yards, and find tour marker **21** on the left.

**21.** This tree with a remarkably spiny trunk is a *silk floss tree* (*Ceiba speciosa* — formerly *Chorisia speciosa*), native to southern Brazil and northern Argentina. The cotton-like fibers within its seed-pods were traditionally used for insulation in sleeping bags and clothing. Its large pink orchid-like flowers are profuse in autumn, appearing just as the leaves drop. The cavity in its trunk is the result of damage during the cold winter of 1990, though it has recovered well.

Follow the path a short distance to the right, and find tour marker **22** at the leading edge of the long structure.

**22.** The tender plants in this central bed are protected from the excessive sunlight of summer by overhead shade cloth, and from the cold and wet of winter by plastic protective covering — please step inside this covering during the winter months. Distinctive plants include varieties of *aeoniums* with large rosettes in colors that vary from green, to red- or purple-tinged, to blackish-purple, some borne on tall smooth stalks; and low-growing clumping *echeverias* in various shades of green, blue-green, pink, and lavender, including pink-edged and ruffle-leaved *Echeveria*
gibbiflora hybrids. Clumps of large aloes anchor the center of this bed.

Walk a short distance with the shade structure on your left, and find tour marker 23 in the bed on the opposite side of the path of the shade structure.

23. The tree with the fine-textured canopy is a Mexican palo verde (Parkinsonia aculeata). It copes with drought by dropping its tiny leaves during dry spells, but continues to grow since its green bark is able to take on the job of photosynthesis. As the desert willow at tour marker 19, this tree provides light shade that helps to protect the plants beneath from the full brunt of the summer sun.

To the left is a large clump of the lime-green *Agave mitis* (formerly known as *Agave celsii*), which has spikes of purple flowers in the spring. The area farther left is dominated by the gigantic dark-green leaves of *Agave salmiana*. Plants in the genus *Agave* are generally distinguished by their rosettes of tough succulent leaves with a spiny margin, terminating in a sharp point. The large forms of agave are often referred to as century plants because after many years of life they flower once, producing a tall tree-like stem bearing many tubular flowers, and then die. Many of them reproduce by generating offshoots or suckers from the base, providing the next generation of plants.

Continue along the path parallel to the shade structure. Find tour marker 24 in the bed on the right, opposite the end of the shade structure.

24. This mounded bed features a South African cycad (*Encephalartos horridus*), with spiky blue leaves. Cycads are ancient plants predating the evolution of flowers; they reproduce by cones. On the right is a *grevillea* cultivar, ‘Kings Fire’, with bottlebrush-like clusters of red flowers. On the far left side of this bed, the distinctive dark-leaved *Leucadendron* cultivar ‘Ebony’ provides dramatic color contrast. *Grevillea* and *Leucadendron* are both members of the protea family, mostly found in South Africa and Australia.

Turning back toward the shade structure, the palm that anchors the end of this bed is a jelly palm (*Butia capitata*). Unlike most palms, which produce a nut, the jelly palm produces a crop of delicious fruit on its dangling flower stalks.

Turn left beyond the jelly palm, and make your way back toward the valley oak that was featured at tour marker 1. Follow the path as it winds to the left of the valley oak, and exit through the gate.

**END OF TOUR**

This concludes the self-guided tour. We encourage you to return in different seasons and at different times of day to enjoy the ever-changing Garden; there is always something new and interesting to see. Visitors who have been inspired to start or expand their own collection of distinctive plants are welcome to visit the plant sales area after exiting.
THANK YOU FOR VISITING

As a local 501 (c)(3) nonprofit, we rely on the generosity of our visitors, Members and donors to keep our Garden growing. Your support helps the Garden thrive! Admission fees, memberships, plant purchases and generous donations help keep our garden and educational programs running.

Connect with us to stay in touch and learn more about this special garden and the variety of programs, special events, and activities we host throughout the year.

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