

# Harland Hand: the Artist as Gardener

PAMELA HARPER

Harland Hand passed away on September 6, 1998. His garden was featured in a series of articles in the early years of *Pacific Horticulture*. The following article had been submitted as an introduction to the book Harland hoped to have published by Chronicle Books. It seems a fitting tribute to an artist whose originality and creativity have had a profound impact on garden design in the Bay Area—and beyond.

Through many years of visiting and photographing gardens, I have been influenced as much by what I feel as by what I see. Sadly, in so many gardens, there is little to be felt, though there may be much to learn and admire. What is it that gives a garden that special magic? I realized that, more often than not, emotive gardens are the work of artists. Why, then, has it seldom been artists who write the books that guide the gardener's footsteps? And why, with the possible exception of Japanese gardens, has the art world not embraced garden making as a fine art?

The essence of art is originality, experimentation, and development of new techniques. Driven by an inner vision, the artist's approach is partly intuitive; mistakes and failures are part of the process. Instruction (including instruction in art), on the other hand, is based in large part on what has already been done successfully, with rules and formulas aimed at the avoidance of mistakes. How, then, does one teach originality?

Many good books on design exist, but design, in the architectural sense, is not the same thing as artistry—it may in fact be inimical to it if "rules" inhibit creativity. What at first may be original quickly becomes stereotyped. A steady stream of questioning and inventive minds is needed if garden-making is to remain fresh and exciting. Freeing gardeners from con-

formity was the goal of the late Harland Hand in his manuscript for a book to be published by Chronicle Books.

"A painting is a landscape seen through a particular temperament" wrote Jean-Batiste Corot. So is a garden, but garden-making is a more mutable and practical art, with some aspects outside the maker's control. Unlike a painting, there is no such thing as a "finished" garden. A knowledge of soil preparation, plant selection, planting procedures, fertilization, watering, and pruning—all relative to the existing soils and climate of the site—is necessary for success. Though amply dealt with in innumerable books, much of the gardening lore purveyed is mere repetition, and some of it has been rendered controversial by subsequent studies: the painting of tree wounds, for instance, is no longer advocated, and tree roots are no longer thought to mimic the pattern of trunk and branches seen above ground. As artisan and plantsman, as well as artist and former science teacher, Harland Hand was always willing to offer fresh insights into "what works"—words he used frequently.

Societal pressures, sometimes enforced by regulation, also influence garden-making: the meadow garden of one home-owner's vision may be the "weeds" of a neighbor. Vogue is not a reliable lodestar: customs change but gardens cannot be as easily altered as hemlines. The



trend in suburban neighborhoods has been for unbroken sweeps of lawn. Now "natural" gardens, using only native plants, are being advocated, and those mowing grass, pampering roses, or sculpting topiary are made to feel guilty. Homogeneity, however desirable its intent, spells death to artistry. Harland Hand always ventured beyond the circumscribed and encouraged his fellow gardeners and garden-makers to do likewise. His belief that gardens should be more personalized was manifest in occasional impassioned proselytizing against the many "oughts," "musts," and passing fads that make gardens so often imitative when they could be wondrously original.

If the essence of art is inspiration and originality, can it be taught beyond a discussion of techniques? Some of Harland's techniques were themselves innovative and have inspired other designers to break from convention in their gardens. The world of art would have been less rich had Picasso tried to imitate Monet or Cezanne, but the world's great artists have always studied each other's work and learned from it. So have landscape architects. When visiting other gardens—in person or by way of books and published articles—we glean ideas that stimulate our own creative thoughts.

I met Harland Hand in 1976, at a horticultural gathering where he was soliciting subscriptions for the newly launched *Pacific Horticulture* magazine. His own garden was featured in an article, *The Concrete Garden*, appearing in the first issue (January '76). That garden in the Berkeley Hills was just beginning to draw acclaim. Most of those I talked to were excited by it. A few, unable to reconcile Harland's garden with traditional landscape design concepts, found it puzzling. America is only now becoming steady on its horticultural feet; lawned, hedged, flower border-bedecked "English" gardens were then what many sought to emulate.

Harland, intentionally provocative, told me that 150 cubic yards of concrete had been used in the making of his half-acre garden on a hillside overlooking San Francisco Bay, piquing my curiosity but leaving me unprepared for the bewitching garden I was to see. A display garden created by the English Cement and

Concrete Association had opened my eyes to the many ornamental uses of concrete, but only now did I see its esthetic potential fully realized. Harland's garden was a revolutionary departure from the conventional.

Though by no means a "natural" garden (an oxymoron, anyway), it seems shaped by rushing water finding its way down a steep rocky slope, creating plateaus, smoothing boulders, meandering around rocks and leaving shallow pools in its wake. The site does have some natural rock, but sculpted concrete forms the paths, steps, pools, the floors of the terraced "rooms," and the seats that furnish them, yet with no feeling of artificiality.

When, later, we visited together the place of his inspiration in the high granite peaks of the Sierra Nevada, it almost seemed that nature was imitating Harland. Here were the trails, shelters, and overlooks cardinal to his designs; here the seat-like boulders which would become in the garden boulder-like seats; here raised pools, carved in granite by the elements, become in the garden raised pools of sculpted concrete. In the garden, lamb's ears stitches together concrete paths and paving in textured gray on gray; in the wild, gray artemisia and eriogonum fills granite interstices to similar effect. Dark stains made by water on the gray granite in the mountains are, in the garden, translated into the dark patterning of miniature thyme spreading over concrete paving.

The concept of garden rooms is not new, being exemplified in such famous gardens as Hidcote and Sissinghurst in England, and Filoli in California. Harland's was a new interpretation, with paths flowing from one open space to the next as a stream might widen into a pool and then narrow again—soft, smooth, freeform, and un-geometric—its many secluded, peaceful enclaves achieved without hedges, walls, fences, or lawn, like a scroll painting unrolling before one's feet. The use of design ploys to stretch space is remarkable, and interest never wavers in this plantsman's garden, far removed from being a mere collection. Associations of color and form range from serene to exhilarating, and all brought near at hand by the many paths and steps that wind through the garden.

Could these techniques be transferred to





Industrial Oasis, designed by Harland Hand. Author's photograph

other, very different sites? The answer proved to be yes in many other gardens Harland subsequently designed. One challenge lay in a square, flat, characterless downtown lot surrounded by low-rise industrial buildings. This the owners asked Harland to turn into a peaceful haven and meeting place—an “industrial oasis”—for their employees.

A high fence erected on all four sides gives the needed privacy. Inside and adjacent to it runs a causeway providing height and overlooks, surfaced in smooth gray concrete stepping stones with plants lapping the edges and filling crevices. A timbered pavilion towards the back of the lot houses toilet and storage facilities. In front of it, a railed deck forms part of the walkway leading round the garden. Below it Louisiana and Japanese irises and other moisture-lovers fill the shallows at the edge of a small pond.

I confess to doubts when, during early construction, I watched the remaining space being broken up into large scattered mounds implanted with rocks, not laid flat and two-thirds buried as I'd been taught to do, but stood

on end. A year later I visited again. From the busy street nothing could be seen of the secret garden that lay behind the fence. With the air of a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, Harland opened the high gate and stood back to reveal a garden that provided for both solitude and sociability. Winding paths passed through “rooms” hidden behind the mounds, each with plank-like benches seating from two to ten. The mounds were now thickly planted and rich with color in varying combinations.

Till his health took a serious turn in recent years, Harland was in great demand as a garden designer, and his work was featured in many books and articles. His projects ranged from simple to grand, and from low to limitless budgets. They include a woodland garden; a place where children can play while parents sit and watch in a small strip where two streets meet; a low-maintenance communal garden; and a nearly vertical garden in the small space behind an urban rowhouse, the garden's upper level higher than the roof. No two are alike; all have much to teach, and all offer even more to be felt. ♪

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*Editor:* Richard G Turner Jr  
4104 - 24th Street #111, San Francisco, CA 94114  
415/285-7224 Fax: 415/970-9143

*Editor Emeritus:* George Waters

*Associate Editor:* Dr Elizabeth McClintock

*Assistant Editor:* John Kadel Boring

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*Deutzia scabra* grows easily in a mild climate, highlighting a bed of alstroemeria, kniphofia, and *Rosa* 'Blueberry Hill'. Photograph by Bob Wigand in the demonstration garden at Judy's Perennials

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