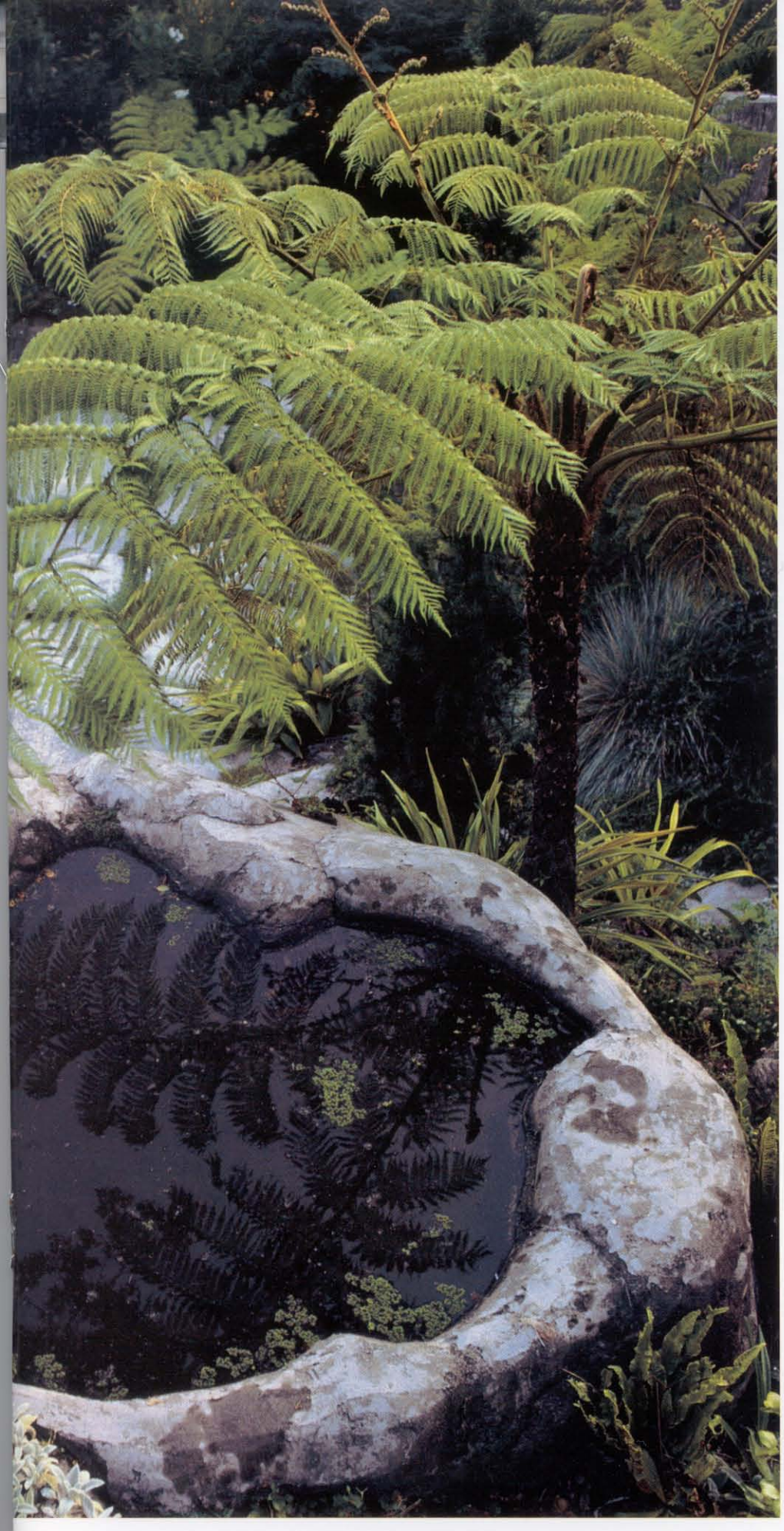
Sierran Inspiration

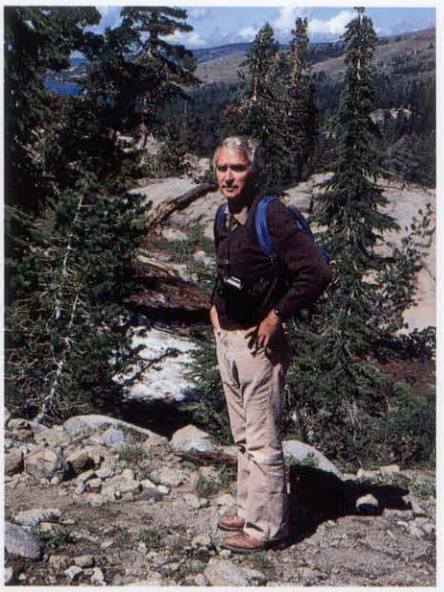
TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY PAMELA HARPER

I have written before about Harland Hand's California garden, with its 60-foot-wide planter-faced cliff, 12 paved "rooms," 15 seats and ledges, 19 pools and over 200 boulder-like steps, all fitted—without crowding—into a half-acre hillside site, with the city of El Cerrito immediately below, and beyond it, a panoramic view of San Francisco Bay. (See "A Garden Work of Art" in the April 1983 issue of *American Horticulturist*.) Fitting so much into half an acre requires a sound knowledge of design principles. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but a garden is not a superhighway. In this garden, winding paths greatly stretch the apparent space.

Harland Hand's garden was inspired by the flowing lines and strongly contrasting colors characteristic of the region—for instance, by the dark domes of valley oaks, which seem black in contrast to California's sinuous, light green or wheat-gold hills. But the main source of inspiration was the Silver Lake area of the Sierras, where pale gray granite and dark vegetation intermingle in a scene of two-tone grandeur. What Harland finds so exciting about the Silver Lake region is the strength of the lines of the rocks found there: "So powerful, yet their surface smooth and delicately tooled." His garden was designed as a similar mosaic of dark and light, embellished with color and a wealth of plants. It is structured in concrete, which is the only available, affordable and manipulable material capable of being sculpted to resemble the granite formations in the Sierras.

In creating the garden, Harland sought to capture not only what is *seen* in nature, but also what is felt. He doesn't speak of paths, walls, terraces and vistas, but rather of trails, shelters and overlooks, which he





considers expressive of instinctive human needs. The shelter offers safety and solitude. The overlook is a vantage point, a place with a view. The trail satisfies our need to explore, and is far more satisfying when it winds sufficiently to conceal what is just around the bend, and permits the visitor to return by a different route.

The garden's "room" theme is not new; it can be seen in many English gardens, notably Hidcote and Sissinghurst. In those gardens, however, rooms are structured like those of a house, surrounded by walls or wall-like hedges, and entered through doors or archways. Harland's approach is different, and takes its lead from nature. Islands of trees and shrubs are used to define the spaces, and all lines—following nature's example—are curved and flowing. This beautiful spot resembles a Japanese garden (inspired by similar mountain scenery), but with far more color and plant variety.

This is a plantsman's garden. Harland refutes the suggestion that a gardener can have either a good design or a large collection of plants, but not both. His garden proves that such a marriage can be made to work. In this case, the design came first, but was always created with the intention of providing a setting for plants. Hundreds of specimens now grow on Harland's

ABOVE: Harland Hand in the Sierras. His garden was inspired by the contrast between dark and light and the breathtaking scenery of the Silver Lake region in the Sierras. FAR LEFT: A granite mountain pool in the Sierras that was sculptured by the elements. LEFT: Tree fern fronds are mirrored in the water of a pool in Harland Hand's garden. The pool, which was sculptured in concrete, is poised like its mountain counterpart on the edge of a cliff. Garden rooms and distant pools can be seen in the "valley" below.

ABOVE: Dark water creates a pattern against gray granite in the Silver Lake region of the Sierras. TOP: In the garden, patches of creeping thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) contrast with gray concrete to create a similar light-and-dark theme. BOTTOM RIGHT: A Sierran mountain "room" carpeted with golden grass. TOP RIGHT: A garden room in Harland Hand's garden, planted with *Aurinia saxatilis*, *Thymus serpyllum* and *Aloe striata* hybrids.

property: trees, shrubs, vines, perennials, annuals, bulbs, ferns and grasses. Harland has taken full advantage of the benign climate by including such exotics as orchids, kangaroo-paws (*Anigozanthos flavidus*), Spanish-shawl (*Heterocentron elegans*), and bird-of-paradise tree (*Strelitzia nicolai*). Plants are not allowed to obscure the design. Over-exuberant growth is controlled by pruning and, when necessary, by removal. Some part of the garden is always being reworked, a continual process that is viewed not as a chore but as an opportunity to try out new ideas and introduce new plants.

When I wrote about the garden before, I had not seen Harland's wellspring of inspiration, the Sierras. In the late summer of 1983, we planned a trip together to the Winnemuca Trail—"the most exciting, uniquely beautiful place I've seen," says Harland. It wasn't an easy trip to plan. At that high elevation—9,000 feet—snow lies deep and remains on the ground late into summer; in mid-August, it was still too deep to make the excursion feasible. We took a chance and made reservations at a mountain lodge for early September. I awoke the first day to pouring rain, a howling wind and no electricity—not an auspicious beginning.

Luck was with us, however; the next day was perfect for a mountain hike. It was nearly windless, the temperature was a comfortable 65° F, and the sky was blue but with enough puffs of cottony cloud to be photogenic and, given patience, to obscure the sun briefly when shadowless pictures were wanted. We had to pick our way through occasional patches of snow, but most of it had melted up to 9,000 feet. We didn't know then just how lucky we were; a few days after our visit, winter set in and the snow began to fall again.

As we climbed, I was struck immediately by scenes that were reminiscent of Harland's garden. Tufts of brilliant yellow buckwheat (*Eriogonum umbellatum*) growing between smooth-surfaced gray granite slabs seemed to be nature's version of the yellow alyssum (*Aurinia saxatilis*) in the garden's concrete paving, and tussocks of brown grass at the base of boulders brought to mind brown sedges (*Carex* spp.) alongside concrete garden seats. Fern-frond shadows, black against pale gray rock, had the same etched effect as the fronds of tree ferns in the garden seen against gray sky at dusk. The hardier mountain counterpart of the ruby-tinted jellybean sedum (*Sedum* × *rubrotinctum*) found in Harland's garden could be seen emerging from moist niches at the leeward base of a granite ledge.

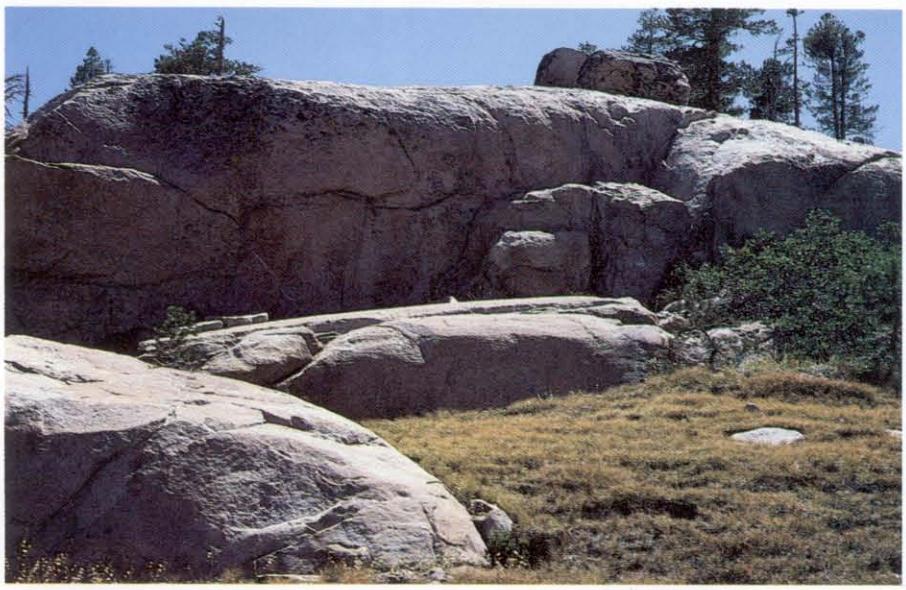
In the garden, dark green thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*) and flowerless chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile* 'Treneague') form nearly black, free-form patterns on the concrete paving. In the Sierras, I saw similar patterning—where water seeped over pale gray granite, and again, where dark-leaved manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*) was spread-eagled over smooth, pale rock, and yet again, where conifer needles had caught and rotted to a dark brown duff in hollows between rocks. Which of these features was mimicked in the garden? All, and none. The garden developed from multiple impressions that were absorbed and reinterpreted. For example, dwarf chaparral broom (*Baccharis pilularis*) trailing over a rock in the mountain might, in the garden, become a pink-bobbled shawl of *Polygonum capitatum* flung over a concrete bench.

On our hike, we came to a plateau where all was gray, except for the odd blue lupine. The silvery, incised leaves of artemisia flowing over and around the rock provided textural contrast. The serenity of this gray-on-gray theme is echoed in Harland's garden by the tiny leaves of snow-in-summer (*Cerastium tomentosum*) and the larger, velvety leaves of lamb's-ears (*Stachys byzantina*), which fill and soften the joints between paving and vertical structures.

After experiencing the calm of the gray plateau, we came upon brilliant, exciting color, where Indian paintbrush (*Castilleja*) turned an entire slope to scarlet. I felt certain that one particular large, smooth boulder with a clump of *Castilleja* at its base must have been the model for a look-alike concrete bench in the garden, with orange *Aloe striata* planted nearby. But we were to see many more of nature's benches that might just as easily have been the model.

A raised concrete pool in Harland's garden clings precipitously to the edge of a cliff. It was exciting to find its mountain counterpart. How long had it taken the wind and rain and frost and snow to fashion this age-old sculpture? The rim bore a dark, wet stain, bringing to mind the dark stain of wire vine (*Muehlenbeckia axillaris*) flowing over the rim of one of the garden's raised pools. Seat and pool were combined in another mountain sculpture, where one end of a large, flat rock had somehow been hollowed out.

Despite the bitter winter cold, these mountains are brilliant with flowers in summer. For low-growing, winter-dormant plants, deep snow acts as a kind of life preserver. But not for the conifers. Skeletons of dead trees are one of the beauties of the mountains. As we walked, we noticed the bleached trunks, which gleamed



in the bright sunshine and looked as if they had been sculpted in silver. Each was unique: twisted, contorted and huddled low; antler-like; slender and bowed by snow into an arch that framed a view. Some were denuded of branches and remained stiffly upright, like accusing fingers pointing at the sky. In the garden, driftwood posts are used for similar effect, some as bare vertical accents, others softened with vines. On one such garden post, the star-like, white-flowered *Clematis* 'Henryi' is intertwined with white wisteria. The effect is ethereal at dusk.

I backpacked my cameras, while Harland carried lunch. We sat down on boulder seats to eat, and tried to identify the flowers that surrounded us. Far below, a lake—shrunken to pool size by distance—reflected the blue of the sky. Five lakes could be seen from the trail: Caples Lake, Red Lake, Silver Lake, Frog Lake and Lake Winnemuca. The garden tops this number, with 19 pools.

Of all we saw that day, perhaps the most exciting was a complete "room" furnished by nature, complete with couch, shelves, table and hassocks. The "room" was backed by a wall of smooth rock and carpeted with a shag rug of golden grass. What a magical place this would be for a child to play! I thought. The structures bore an amazing resemblance to those made of concrete in the garden.

The trail wound on. A snow-capped mountain lay ahead, and down it tumbled a mountain stream; the splash of water was audible from where we stood. Often I have stood by the "stream" of *Echeveria* rosettes flowing across a slope in Harland's garden, imagining it to be a gentle brook purling over pebbles. Now imagination's eye and ear could also envision it as rushing white water.

By mid-afternoon, it was time to turn back. So much still lured us on, but the trail had not always been easy to find, and we had to be off the mountain before dark. Going back, we were both absorbed in our own thoughts. Dinner was similarly silent, but eaten with good appetite and with much food for thought.

American Horticultural Society members will tour Harland Hand's remarkable garden on a special optional tour to be held August 18, following the Society's August 13-16 Annual Meeting in San Francisco, California. For more information, write to Annual Meeting, American Horticultural Society, P.O. Box 0105, Mount Vernon, VA 22121.

Pamela Harper is the owner of the Harper Horticultural Slide Library, and is a frequent contributor to *American Horticulturist*.