

Legendary Sonoma nursery about to change hands

Western Hills a major influence for 30 years

By Ken Druse
NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

May 22, 2005

OCCIDENTAL – If you ask gardeners about their early influences, they often cite a parent or grandparent. But many serious gardeners in California – and throughout the country – are quick to mention Western Hills, a little nursery on the fringe of this Sonoma County village.

For more than 30 years, Western Hills, surrounded by a three-acre arboretum and display garden, has been a destination for those looking for rare and unusual plants, as well as for a glimpse into horticulture's future. Some of the most exquisite plant varieties in American gardens were introduced here. And it has been something of a badge of honor to find a plant that wasn't already in the collection and have the nursery propagate and disseminate it.

For all its influence, the nursery has an uncertain future. It will be open to the end of May and for the rest of the season to regular customers by appointment. Then it will close, unless owner Maggie Wych finds a buyer committed to maintaining it.

"I've been coming to Western Hills since the nursery opened in 1973," said Brandon Tyson, a Bay Area garden designer, "and each time I see things in a new way. It might just be a single plant, and by the time I get home, I've designed a whole garden around it."

Dan Hinkley, a founder of the Heronswood nursery in Kingston, Wash., which is known for offering the latest botanical marvels, calls Western Hills his personal mecca, adding, "There is a realness and trueness and originality to the place."

Fifteen years before the nursery opened, Marshall Olbrich and Lester Hawkins, pioneers of the back-to-the-land movement, bought a hilly tract of former pastureland 60 miles north of San Francisco. They built a rustic house and planted vegetables during what Olbrich once called "the obligatory organic-homestead phase." Like many novice gardeners, they turned from edibles to ornamentals, eventually selling propagated plants and establishing a nursery.

Record winter rains and summer drought notwithstanding, the climate worked in their favor. It is cool enough in the area for plants like lilacs and apples to get the chill they need to bloom or bear fruit, and warm enough for subtropical plants like grassy New Zealand flax and abutilons, with their colorful, nodding bells.

The house nestles into a hillside and overlooks paths that wind down through the garden to the east. Botanical treasures line the path leading to a large pond, and plank bridges cross a runnel carved by rain into the canyon floor. There is a contorted camellia with twisted stems, an evergreen barberry with sherbet-orange flowers, and a daphne with pink flowers that smell of lilies and mesquite smoke.

Hawkins concentrated on the garden's naturalistic design, while Olbrich gathered seeds from around the world. He corresponded with an international circle of plant-lovers and visited many of the countries where his specimens originated. Over time, Western Hills became a compulsory stop for the horticultural elite.

The garden writers and designers Wayne Winterrowd and Joe Eck say Western Hills strongly influenced them when they were planning their own garden, North Hill, in Readsboro, Vt., 30 years ago.

"We thought we'd have to bulldoze and flatten our steep site," Winterrowd explained. "But Lester and

Marshall taught us the importance of following the dictates of the land and respecting what it offered. We also learned the richness of seeking out the best and newest plants, while preserving the best of the old ones."

Hawkins died in 1985 after a long illness. Olbrich's sudden death from a heart attack in 1991 was followed by an aftershock: Rather than leave the nursery to one of the young horticulturists who had honed their skills at Western Hills, as expected, he left it to Maggie Wych, a jewelry designer who had worked part-time at the nursery since 1982.

Many in the horticultural community were stunned. Wych was, too. She had become Olbrich's closest friend, but she was not a professional gardener. Nonetheless, she decided to keep the nursery going by educating herself – reading every book in the nursery's library, getting to know all the plants and fostering relationships the men had developed over the years while cultivating a new generation of plant enthusiasts. Fourteen years after taking over, Wych is credited with unrivaled plant knowledge and propagation skill.

In spite of financial and artistic success, Wych, 57, is putting the place up for sale. Maintaining her inheritance has become a trial; she said she has not had a vacation in years and often works two weeks straight without a day off.

Perhaps the biggest challenge has been to uphold the legend. "People from the old days come by and reminisce about how wonderful it was to be in the company of those men and the old garden," Wych said. "It's a bit much, being thought of as the keeper of the flame."

She hopes for a buyer who, like herself and previous owners, is dedicated to plants, "somebody who has an appreciation for the trees and shrubs here, can maintain them and add new plants to make it more beautiful," she said.

The property alone in this popular second-home area has a market value of at least \$2 million, but Wych has not yet set an asking price. "Most important," she said, "I'm hoping for someone who falls in love with the place."