

Montalvo's garden committee restores plot to full glory

By Jeff Kendall-Weed
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True to its mission statement "to foster community engagement through the creation and presentation of multidisciplinary art," the latest project at Villa Montalvo has built an enormous community. But rather than through creation, it has been through restoration of a tattered and unkempt garden in front of the villa.

"I've gone up [to the garden] off and on for years, and I felt there was a lot of potential. It's a classic Italian garden, and I just felt it had been neglected and could use work," says Donna Guildamann, a member of the Villa Montalvo Garden Committee.

The garden sits northeast of the villa, just below the expanse of dark green grass that plays host to weddings during summer months.

Surrounded by a tall wrought-iron fence, the garden has an international history dating back to Sen. Joseph Phelan's original occupation of the villa. Yet, almost 100 years since its creation, the garden has lived through many caretakers, each with a distinctly different vision and idea for the

spread of hedges, trees and flowers. Last summer, the garden's state of neglect and disorder prompted community members to reinstate the grandeur of the Italian garden.

"It just took getting Susan [Finocchio] to look at the garden and realize its potential," Guildamann says. "Susan really is the energy and deserves an enormous amount of credit because she's a person who gets things done."

Finocchio, a member of the Grounds Committee of Villa Montalvo, as well as a Montalvo trustee, received the idea of rehabilitating the old garden with welcoming hands, green thumbs included.

"I was immediately enthused and excited about the idea," says Finocchio.

Garden's secrets

"It's a very romantic garden," Finocchio says. "It's anchored by a love temple, which is a wonderful structure; it's in the style of typical Roman temples; and it's a very romantic spot in both interpretations of the word."

The garden's size, estimated at 2 acres, and the scope of the restoration project necessitated a committee to organize efforts. The garden's historic importance and its proximity to the villa require professional restoration, and the garden has captured the interest of many professionals.

"It's a garden that has wonderful bones," Guildamann says. "In landscape architecture lingo, you talk about the bones of the garden; it's the lines of the garden, how the pathways are laid out. They're laid out as they are in an Italian-style garden, on an axis leading to a destination."

Phelan's inspiration for the garden came from the Italian gardens he visited during his travels. Phelan's gardener, George Doeltz, built the garden with advice from John McLaren, the superintendent of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

"It's a good example of an Italianate garden and of the Eclectic Period," says Denise Kupperman, a landscape designer and key supporter of the project. "The estate is an Eclectic, and this one piece is Italianate."

An Eclectic, in the architectural sense, means that a design employs characteristics of many different styles, rather than simply following one specific trend or style.

The Garden Conservancy of New York has named the garden as a historic landmark. Further strokes came from Katherine Greenberg, president of the Pacific Horticultural Foundation board, who toured the garden prior to the rehabilitation project. The garden was also included in the California Garden and Landscape History Society's 2006 Garden Tour.

Green rehab

"Any project with a historic value is unique because it represents the era when it was designed," says Barrie Coates, professional arborist and key volunteer in the project. "The whole site has historic value, and that implies that it has to be very carefully reconstructed so it doesn't misrepresent the history."

Villa Montalvo will be celebrating its centennial in 2012, and the garden restoration is quickly becoming a focus for those in charge of the estate's grounds. Rather than replant and rebuild the garden with modern materials, those involved agree that the best plan is to restore the garden to George Doeltz's original 1912 masterpiece.

"A lot has been planted over the years that doesn't represent the era," Coates says.

"You have to know what was here, then try to re-evaluate to put it back to how it should be," says Kupperman, who has volunteered over 50 hours since last summer.

Dr. Soroush Ghahramani, a professor at West Valley College and head of the landscape architecture program, had students draft modern plans for re-creating the Mediterranean expanse. With working plans drafted and in order, the efforts of various volunteer crews and donors have already made a difference in the old garden.

"I'm very pleased. We just started this a few months ago, and it's already beginning to take shape," says Barry Fernald, a member of the garden committee.

Planting the seeds

Many of those volunteering time or donating to the project are a direct result of the connections of Paul Mehus, chairman of the Buildings and Grounds Committee, a Montalvo trustee and owner of Mehus Construction.

"Paul has spearheaded the organization of these companies and has just been wonderful in keeping the project moving," Finocchio says.

Creekside Landscaping donated over \$15,000 in labor and materials with an initial cleanup of the site.

"We do a lot of work for Mehus Construction, and Paul called me up and asked me if I'd be interested in donating my time, and I said sure!" Wheeler says. "Montalvo is a beautiful place. We're a landscape company, and any landscape that's been there that long is done well, and that's what we like to look at."

Working with Wheeler, Mehus was able to arrange the purchase of the navel orange trees from a source in Fresno to line the dominant pathway of the garden. The trees were purchased at wholesale prices and trucked to Saratoga. Hernandez Landscaping and West Coast Tree Care have also made significant donations to the garden project.

"We had an anonymous donor who gave us \$10,000, so that, plus a little bit of money that several of us have put in, has been what we've had to work with so far," Mehus says. "I'm sure the larger cypress trees are original. It's almost frightening how original that place is."

The orange and cypress trees, along with some hedges, are all part of the restoration process. Much of the rest of the garden is primed for planting, and the committee is organizing a workday to plant a variety of period- and theme-correct roses.

"We are excited to find that we've had approximately 300 Weeks roses, from the patented Pillow Fight variation, donated," says Finocchio. "They're gorgeous, with a honey scent, and will define our paths and be an appropriate plant for the garden."

Workdays are planned for Feb. 14, April 11 and May 9 from 9 a.m. to noon. Volunteers need to contact Montalvo at least a week ahead of time to determine availability.

Plans also include bathrooms and more handicap accessibility. The overriding goal of the garden is to further complete Montalvo as a wedding destination. Long-term plans for the villa call for an increase in concerts and weddings, as both can bring in significant funding for the upkeep of the estate. Villa staff and volunteers hope the garden, and the sparkling Temple of Love in its center, will become a self-funding organism.

Maintaining history

Once the garden is fully restored, the roses will have to be deadheaded and the hedges trimmed.

"We're in the process of contracting someone for the maintenance, since [restoration] doesn't do any good if it isn't maintained," Mehus says. "We still have some funds available from the original anonymous donor that we're going to put toward the maintenance of the garden, so we are set for the near term."

Long-term maintenance is another issue.

"Building is cheaper than the ongoing maintenance, and we don't really know how it's going to be kept up," Fernald says. "We weren't even sure how we'd get this far, but we're seeing more and more interest. People don't mind doing things when they see it move forward."

Those involved with the project say this generosity has kept the restoration moving forward thus far.

"The donations all came in privately. Just when you think you've hit a roadblock, someone else donates time or money, and we get to another level," says Finocchio.

"It's been terrific seeing it gain momentum and getting it going; it was in tremendous disrepair," says Sydene Kober, a six-year veteran of the Montalvo Grounds Committee and a former Montalvo trustee.

"The biggest challenge has been finding the funding to put in the substantial improvements, but I think the challenge has been met by the committee and trustees," says Vandana Pant, Montalvo's director of development. "They've contributed funds on their own, and tons of time."

"All we need now," adds Finocchio, "is a little more funding and, as one board member put it, a big chain saw."

To donate to Villa Montalvo's garden restoration project, contact Vandana Pant at (408) 961-5839. To volunteer for a workday, contact Babette McKay at (408) 961-5828. Villa Montalvo is at 15400 Saratoga-Los Gatos Rd., Saratoga. For more information, visit www.montalvoarts.org. Workdays are planned for Feb. 14, April 11 and May 9 from 9 a.m. to noon. Volunteers need to contact Montalvo at least a week ahead of time to determine availability.