



A History of Marin Art and Garden Center

Marin Art and Garden Center's rich history is connected to the rise of the modern environmental movement in Marin County. Located in the town of Ross in southern Marin County, just north of San Francisco, the Center was the creation of a group of visionary women who set out in the 1930s to ensure the preservation of Marin County's scenic beauty and open space.

Ross township is named after James Ross, a Scot who travelled from Australia after learning of the discovery of gold in California. Ross quickly found fortune as a seller of liquor and lumber to the Gold Rush miners. In 1857, he parlayed his success into the purchase of the Rancho Punta de San Quentin for \$50,000 in gold coin from Benjamin Buckelew. The Rancho was a Spanish land grant comprising 8,877 acres of what is known as central Marin County today, from San Quentin to Fairfax. Ross' untimely death in 1862 forced the liquidation of a significant portion of the Rancho in order to settle his estate.

Ross's eldest daughter, Annie, married his business partner, George Austin Worn, and together they carved out a parcel from the Rancho in the heart of what would become Ross Valley, and more specifically, the future home of Marin Art and Garden Center. In 1864, the Worns built a barn for their livestock and a large, octagonal-shaped structure to house the well. When they finished building their ranch-style home, they aptly named it "Sunnyside." George and Annie Worn were dedicated horticulturalists who traveled extensively in search of specimen plants and trees they would plant at their new home. Annie and George's daughter, Isabella, was a celebrated horticulturalist, flower arranger, and interior designer. "Bella" as she was known, was one of the garden designers of Filoli Gardens in Woodside and William Randolph Hearst's Castle in San Simeon.

The Worns unfortunately lost their family fortune and sold their property in 1882 to Jonathan Gosman Kittle and his wife Harriette DeWitt Allen Kittle. The Kittles rebuilt Sunnyside to become one of the grandest residences in the Ross Valley. Their descendants would enjoy the family estate for nearly fifty years. Following a sudden death in the family and a fire that destroyed Sunnyside in the early 1930s, the family decided against rebuilding, and the landscaped gardens were left fallow and unused.

Around the same time, a number of conservation groups coalesced around their concerns about private development while existing groups placed a new emphasis on preserving open space. Many of these efforts were led by Marin's clubwomen. Brought together initially by a love of gardening and wildflowers, these women quickly became advocates for public lands, beautification in towns and cities, and scenic highways.

Among these early activists was Caroline Livermore (née Sealey), a Ross resident and environmentalist who stood out for her passion and leadership. Livermore, along with a group of friends and garden club



enthusiasts, was instrumental in founding Marin Conservation League in 1934. The availability of the Kittle property brought Livermore's energies to focus when she learned that the heirs planned to sell Sunnyside for subdivision. She immediately rallied friends and supporters to save the property. In addition to upholding conservation work of state and local garden clubs, national garden club organizations encouraged the development of garden centers as meeting places, forums for education, and demonstration gardens. With the end of World War II, club members also saw a role for garden centers as memorial spaces commemorating war veterans as well as others. The property's dense tree cover and potential for garden development lent itself to a memorial function where trees, groves, and garden furnishings could be dedicated to individuals by family, friends, and community.

Although the idea of memorial gardens was new, the idea of a garden center in Marin had been raised as early as 1934 by members of Marin Garden Club. However, as community interest grew, the idea of a center attracted a broad local constituency that expanded the center's original focus beyond interests in horticulture and conservation to also include visual and performing arts.

Livermore's efforts were successful, and Marin Art and Garden Center was incorporated on August 3, 1945. The Center hosted theatrical events, dance performances, art exhibits and sales, and horticultural shows. Many of the events became annual affairs eagerly anticipated and widely patronized by Marin residents.

Unquestionably the largest event was the County-wide annual fair held at the Center from 1946 to 1970. In keeping with the Center's purpose, conservation was highlighted at booths and displays not only by the Center's own groups, but by many other local organizations. Art demonstrations included painting, ceramics, and weaving, as well as gallery sales. Theater and dance troupes provided entertainment with performances throughout the grounds. To accommodate an ever-growing audience, the fair was moved to Marin Civic Center Fairgrounds designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

Marin Art and Garden Center was particularly fortunate in these early stages of development to attract an outstanding group of well-known Bay Area architects and landscape architects who define the Bay Area Regional Modernism movement. In 1947, the Board engaged landscape architect Thomas Church to undertake a topographic survey of the entire property. The Studio, designed by Gardner Dailey in 1948 for the Marin Society of Artists / Frances Young Gallery was renovated in 2016 and provides year-round space for lectures, workshops, and curated shows of visual artists' work from throughout the Bay Area.

Don Emmons of Wurster, Bernardi and Emmons created a Master Plan in the early 1950s. Shortly thereafter, the Center undertook an ambitious building program on the north side of the property along Kittle Creek to support various auxiliary groups affiliated with the Center. These buildings embody the innovation of mid-century design that is widely celebrated today. With their low-slung rooflines and expansive windows, simple materials and forms, they exemplify the graceful minimalism of California indoor-outdoor living.



Pixie Park was founded in 1952 by Elizabeth Terwilliger with support from the American Association of University Women and landscape architect, Robert Royston. The playground was designed as a place for childcare for members and volunteers while they attended events and lectures. Supporters of Pixie Park gathered donations for the first buildings at the Center. In 1958 Pixie Parents incorporated and continue to accept members to this day.

The Laurel House opened its doors as Northgate Antique Shop in 1956 and was managed by a group of dedicated volunteers until early 2020. It will reopen later this year with a mix of antiques and new merchandise related to art, gardens, and nature. As well as operating the shop, Northgate Group and Decorations Guild volunteers hosted teas, fashion shows, and plant sales to benefit the Center.

In 1969 Helen Horst Moya generously funded the renovation of the Octagon House to honor her husband, José Moya del Piño, a distinguished painter, muralist, and educator; and the José Moya del Piño Memorial Library was named in his memory. The building also houses Ross Historical Society (1994).

Ross Valley Players (RVP) is a founding member of Marin Art and Garden Center originally formed by Beth Lloyd and a small group of women in 1930 as a way to escape the hardships of the Depression. After performing at various indoor and outdoor venues, including the Cushing Memorial Amphitheatre on Mt. Tamalpais, the Kittle estate offered RVP the The Barn in 1939.

The memorial function of the Center is visibly served by plaques, sculpture and benches throughout the property. The Memory Garden donated by the Marin Garden Club was designed by Helen Van Pelt in 1947 and redesigned in 1953 by respected Marin County horticulturist, Herman Hein. Adjacent to the Memory Garden, a large centrally located pool and fountain is dedicated to Gladys Smith, providing a serene resting point in the garden at the end of the entry path. Smith played a critical role in founding the Center with Livermore and was an active Marin Garden Club member.

Memorial plantings include the Dawn Redwood and a Giant Sequoia, and notable heritage trees include the Mission Pear Tree and English Oak Tree. Visitors are encouraged to enjoy many distinct garden areas at the Center – the Succulent Garden, Basketry Garden, Edible Garden, Habitat Garden, and Sun Garden.

In the heart of the Center sits the Rose Garden designed by members of the Marin Rose Society in 2004. Encircled by a decorative wrought-iron fence, the garden features one-hundred and fifty varieties of roses – climbers, hybrid teas and floribundas, English roses, miniatures, shrub and old garden roses.

In 2006, the Center lost a 135-year old Magnolia tree planted by George Worn in 1870. Thankfully, the Center is left with a ring of magnificent magnolia trees that formed when the lower branches bent to the ground and rooted from the original tree planted by Worn.



Today, Marin Art and Garden Center is a cultural and educational hub where a diverse community comes to celebrate weddings, memorials, and host business and nonprofit events in collaboration with Marin-based artist and conservation groups. The Center is home to The Garden School, a pre-school program that focuses on child development through art, music, movement, and nature. Elementary-school field trip programs are offered in collaboration with Marin County schools and Marin Master Gardeners.

Marin Art and Garden Center is a tribute to the wise and dedicated women whose perseverance saved some of the most important landscapes and natural areas in California for public use and enjoyment. The Center was recently nominated to the National Register of Historic Places overseen by the U.S. Department of the Interior and the National Park Service. Marin Art and Garden Center's vision is to provide a welcoming haven for growth, renewal, and celebration that inspires a sense of responsibility for the preservation of this special gathering place for generations to come.

Bibliography

Cappelletti, Fran (José Moya del Piño Memorial Library | Ross Historical Society website)

Gilpin, Phoebe "Driving Miss Worn, and More" *Pacific Horticulture Society*, October 2009
<https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/articles/driving-miss-worn-and-more/>

Londeree, Nanette "There's Magic Behind Those Walls," *Pacific Horticulture Society*, October 2008
<https://www.pacifichorticulture.org/articles/theres-magic-behind-those-walls/>

Nawi, Carol "The Marin Art and Garden Center" *Eden: A Journal of the California Garden & Landscape History Society*, Fall 2018, Vol. 21, No. 4

Perry, Thomas Ross "The Indomitable Isabella Worn" *Eden: A Journal of the California Garden & Landscape History Society*, Winter 2014, Vol. 17, No. 1

Scales, Gary "MAGC Early History" 2017

Scales, Gary "The Mission Pear Story"

Thompson, Laurie "The Happiest Place on Earth, A History of the Marin County Fair" *Anne T. Kent California Room Community Newsletter of Marin County Free Library*, May 27, 2015
<https://annetkent.kontribune.com/articles/6149>