

Venerable UCSC Arboretum celebrates a half-century of research, teaching and landscape innovation

By Kathryn McKenzie , Living Green

SantaCruzSentinel.com



What: UC Santa Cruz Arboretum

When: Open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily except Thanksgiving and Christmas

Where: 1156 High St., Santa Cruz

Admission: \$5 adults, \$2 children ages 6-17, free to UCSC students, Friends of the Arboretum and arboretum volunteers. Also, free admission first Tuesday of the month and anytime to those only shopping at Norrie's Gift & Garden Shop

Information: arboretum.ucsc.edu or 831-502-2998

There was no great hoopla at the start of the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, just a simple request for volunteers to dig in and start — literally.

Phyllis Norris went to her first volunteer meeting for the arboretum in 1976, and when the meeting concluded, no one left — it was time to plant cuttings and map garden areas.

“Work needed to be done,” she recalls.

And almost 40 years later, she is still at it.

“This is the greatest place in the world,” said Norris, with what she calls “a wealth of wonderful people.”

A lively birthday party combined with fundraising for the future is the intent of the UCSC Arboretum's 50th Anniversary Jubilee, planned for Sunday, Sept. 20, from 4-7 p.m.

Headlining the event is singer/songwriter James Durbin, the Santa Cruz native who rose to fame as a finalist on “American Idol,” and local bluegrass band Jimmy Chickenpants.

The event is also an opportunity to honor several of the arboretum's founders, according to arboretum executive director Jessica Fiske Bailey. Among those to be honored is the arboretum's director of collections and conservation, Brett Hall, who has been on staff since 1975, as well as longtime volunteers Phyllis Norris and Marie Beckham. In addition, several students representing the arboretum's future will also be recognized.

Rounding out the day will be tours and wine tastings with six local vintners pouring. Tickets are \$50 and proceeds go to support the arboretum; for information, email arboretum@ucsc.edu or call 831-502-2998.

Of course, the 148-acre arboretum has come a long way since its humble beginnings on a grassy hillside, where a gift of 90 species of eucalyptus started it all 50 years ago.

At once a research and teaching facility as well as a public garden, it is now considered to have one of the world's premier collections of plants from Down Under — it's thought to have the largest collection of Australian plants outside of Australia — and South African and New Zealand plants in addition to California natives, all of which have evolved over millennia to thrive on drought.

And that's why, in these thirsty times, there has been renewed interest in what the arboretum has to offer.

Ironically, the arboretum may be better known outside of Santa Cruz than within it.

"We get visitors from all over the world, but some locals still don't know it's here," said Stephen McCabe, the arboretum's director of research and curator of succulents.

But arboretum executive director Jessica Fiske Bailey feels certain that will change: "Once they're here and see what we offer, they'll be back," she said.

With the arboretum celebrating its major milestone anniversary this year, a 50th Jubilee Celebration is planned for Sept. 20.

Dedicated volunteers

It began in 1964 with those eucalyptus, and by 1967, founding chancellor Dean E. McHenry had formed a committee to advance the project. It continued in large part due to the efforts of stalwart volunteers such as Norris, who was honored with a lifetime achievement award for her contributions, and hundreds of others who have dug, weeded, pruned and planted through the past five decades.

Advertisement

Much of the staff has also dedicated a good portion of their lives to the arboretum.

McCabe has been there for 30 years, and Brett Hall, director of collections and conservation, is now observing his 40th anniversary there.

Norris said that she understands why so many are hooked on volunteering at the arboretum.

On any given day at the arboretum, wonders abound. Grevillea and pincushion protea add splashes of color, while exotic conifers stretch to the sky. The arboretum is divided into different areas, with Australian, South African and New Zealand gardens, as well as the Fragrance Garden, Butterfly Garden, Eucalyptus Grove, and the Laurasian Forest, and several California native sections.

"Over the years, I think I've done every job there is," Norris said, but her favorite task was leading school tours. These days, because her mobility is more limited, she has turned to propagating plants.

A landscape innovator

More than 300 plant families are represented, with many rare and unusual species, some of which are endangered in their home countries.

Ongoing interactions with wildlife are also part of the landscape — some desirable, and other less so. Norris recalls a thieving raccoon that was nicknamed Buster who had a habit of stealing kids' lunches on school tours. A fence was built years ago to keep out hungry deer, although occasionally some make it inside. But the gardens are a haven for smaller creatures that can fly over barriers, especially pollinators like native bees and butterflies.

However, it is the plants that get most of the attention here.

“From the very start, we went with plants that required little water,” said McCabe, and the species that have been collected at the arboretum have changed the way Californians view their gardens. Having these species on display has left its mark on such influential publications as Sunset's Western Garden Guide, which began including such plants and now recommends many for California landscapes, McCabe said.

One such group of plants are the colorful South African proteas, once thought to be difficult to grow, but because of the arboretum's work in propagating them are now widely available as landscape plants and as cut flowers for floral arrangements.

Spreading the word

Encouraging more people to come out to see the arboretum is one of the top priorities at the moment, said Bailey, with improved signage and interpretation as well as making information available on how to use the plants in California gardens.

For gardeners who want to save water, the arboretum is a valuable resource indeed. The arboretum is actively working to introduce less thirsty Australian natives to local gardens through its Koala Blooms plant program, in which these plants undergo trials at the arboretum and are evaluated so that new plants can be selected and offered to the public through local nurseries.

In addition, a variety of arboretum plants are made available through the volunteer-run Norrie's Gift & Garden Shop, which also offers gift items, pottery, jewelry and garden books.

More educational programs, community outreach and bilingual tours are on the to-do list, Bailey said, and offering music and art events is also being contemplated. More people are also choosing the arboretum as a wedding site.

Sustainability aspects of the arboretum are now being enhanced, with volunteers working on solar power, zero-waste events and more efficient irrigation, Bailey notes.

And of course, keeping it all going through fundraising is also of primary importance.

Admission to the jubilee celebration on Sept. 20 is \$50 per person, which will support arboretum programs in the coming years.

“We intend to continue our work and relevancy for the next 50 years,” said Bailey.

Kathryn McKenzie writes about sustainable living for the Santa Cruz Sentinel. Listen to Kathryn on “Homegirl,” on KRML, around 10:15 a.m. weekdays (102.1 FM, 1410 AM or krml.com). Reach the author at pardonmygarden@att.net or follow Kathryn on Twitter: [@livinggreen2](https://twitter.com/livinggreen2).



Kathryn McKenzie

- [Full bio and more articles by Kathryn McKenzie](#)
- [Back to top](#)