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The Awakening Years

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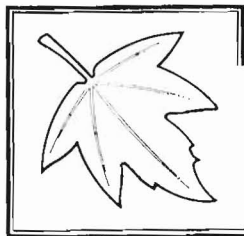


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THE AWAKENING YEARS

Before proceeding further with the history of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden it would be well to consider the horticultural climate of southern California during the first three decades of the Twentieth Century, a period which culminated with the establishment in southern California within a few months between 1926 and 1928 of five botanic gardens, three of them devoted entirely to the native plants of California.¹⁴ According to one recent author the period between 1900 and 1930 can best be described as The Golden Age of horticulture in southern California.¹⁵

The interest in horticulture which had picked up momentum during the 1880's continued unabated during the first three decades of the present century and among the men and women whose names will forever be associated with California gardening are those of Dr Emamuele Orazio Fenzi, known in this country as Dr Francesco Franceschi, and Peter Riedel of the Southern California Acclimatizing Association of Santa Barbara, Kate Olivia Sessions of San Diego, William Hertrich of the Huntington Botanical Garden, Edward Owen Orpet of Santa Barbara, and Theodore Payne of Los Angeles about whom whom we shall have more to say later.

Among horticultural writers three names stand out: Charles Francis Saunders, Ernest Branton, and Alfred D. Robinson. Saunders's book *With the Wild Flowers and Trees In California* appeared in 1914 and was followed in 1926 by *Trees and Shrubs of California Gardens*. Although Saunders was not a serious horticulturist, his books are credited with having helped stimulate interest in the California flora.¹⁵

During the period between 1898 and his death, Ernest Branton (1867-1945) was a major influence in the horticultural world of southern California. A landscape architect, hybridizer, member of the Los Angeles Park Commission, professor of landscape gardening at the University of Southern California, a field botanist, and chairman of the Los Angeles County Board of Forestry, "Branton was a plantsman who knew of what he wrote."¹⁵

Branton had arrived in California from Rockford, Iowa, in 1887 at the age of 19 and went to work for Germain's Seed and Plant Co. For many years he conducted The Garden Doctor column in the *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*. A prolific writer he also contributed the southern Cali-

formia section for Liberty Hyde Bailey's *Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture* and in 1901 began a 34-year affiliation with the popular periodical *California Cultivator*.¹⁵ And it was he who would later write the first press release about the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden. Braunton's *The Garden Beautiful in California* (1940) continued to be a standard reference book for many years.

According to Liberty Hyde Bailey and David Fairchild, the finest begonias in the world were to be found in the San Diego nursery of Alfred D. Robinson. Robinson was one of the founders of the San Diego Floral Association and for many years editor of its publication, *The California Garden*, one of the most important garden magazines of its time and one to which Mrs Bryant subscribed apparently from its inception. As early as 1910, Robinson was advocating the establishment of a botanic garden in San Diego with "a collection of flowers, plants, shrubs and trees as shall make Kew Gardens near London seem a mere amateur effort."¹⁶ Robinson continued to push for a botanic garden suggesting that it be established in conjunction with the 1915 San Diego Exposition "not as an adjunct to or a feature in something else, but free and unfettered . . ."¹⁷ Robinson was concerned about the mass destruction of the native flora in the San Diego area and in *The California Garden* he pleaded for its conservation. Throughout the early volumes of the publication there are numerous popular articles describing the California flora and suggesting that native plants be used in landscaping.

In 1911, Charles F. Baker, then professor of botany at Pomona College was advocating the establishment of a botanic garden on the grounds of the college saying that Pomona then possessed one of the finest parks in the south, consisting of 60 acres of undeveloped land. He reported in the *Pomona College Journal of Economic Botany* (1: 104-105) that without any support they had already obtained some 25,000 plants then growing in pots and all carefully labeled, but that there was no place to plant them where they would be cared for. He concluded by saying that "Even all of this is, under present conditions, no promise at all that it will be possible to accomplish anything permanent whatever at Claremont."

In 1912, Ralph Dalton Cornell (1890-1972) later to become one of southern California's most talented and respected landscape architects but then a 22-year-old student at Pomona College, was advocating the establishment of a public park to be devoted entirely to California native plants. In the *Pomona College Journal of Economic Botany* (2: 301-314), Cornell wrote:

What could be more interesting and educational, to the people at large, than a public park devoted to plants indigenous to our dry and semi-arid lands, and representative of the many forms of plant life that are found along our coast slopes? A dry ground park, planted only to native trees, shrubs and flowers,

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would be one of the greatest possible assets to Southern California, and especially to the community whose park board was sufficiently aggressive and far seeing to establish such a system of planting. Not in all California can one find a collection of the native flora of sufficient consequence to warrant its recognition as such

Such selection of varieties could be made as to insure continual masses of flower or fruit. Spring would undoubtedly be the most gorgeous season, but by judicious selection and arrangement, a continuous wealth of color might be assured. By proper grouping, wonderful effects could be produced, while seeds of wild flowers sown broadcast among the larger plantings, would, each spring, form a gorgeous carpet of natural weave

Now, why not plant dry hillsides in such a manner that they will produce maximum results at minimum expenditure? Plant a *dry ground park*. Use native plants already accustomed to the semi-arid conditions of our soil and climate. Such a park would be at once unique and individual; it would be decidedly typical and distinctive of California; it would be a garden spot of nature, a mecca for birds, a plant paradise; it would be a delight alike to the student, the botanist, the sight-seer and nature lover, each in his own way. If properly handled, it would become of world renown both among tourists and botanists; it would be the one place where those interested might go and see a collection of California plant life in its native environment; might study the habits of the individual, and see its fullest development under favorable conditions. There is no limit to the end that might be attained with such a park, if it were properly conducted.

Cornell concluded his article by listing some of the native trees and shrubs "that should prove suitable for a dry ground park." Cornell was the first landscape architect to locate in Los Angeles and his first professional job was that of Supervising Landscape Architect for Pomona College. He is also remembered as the Supervising Landscape Architect for the University of California's Westwood campus. His book, *Conspicuous California Plants*, was published in 1938.

Among other California garden writers of the early 1900's was Belle Sumner Angier, a resident of San Diego who in *The Garden Book of California* (1906) devoted a chapter to "Native Trees, Shrubs and Flowers." Around the turn of the century, she had collected seeds and bulbs for European firms and had noted that even at that time some plants were becoming rare. She mentioned the red delphinium (*Delphinium cardinale*) in particular.

An even earlier writer was William S. Lyon, California's first State Forester, whose name is commemorated in the Catalina ironwood *Lyonothamnus*. In his *Gardening in California* (1897) under "Bulbs of Special Interest," he recommended the growing of the mariposa lilies, the desert lily, and Parry's lily, all plants that have tried the patience of gardeners ever since.

Another noted California horticulturist, John McLaren, Superintendent of Golden Gate Park, in *Gardening in California, Landscape and Flower*

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(1909) recommended the use of several native trees but only a single group of shrubs, the California lilacs. E. J. Wickson, professor of horticulture at the University of California, Berkeley, in *California Garden Flowers* (1915) recommended a considerable number of native trees and shrubs, as did Sydney B. Mitchell in his *Gardening in California* published in 1923.

However, the man most responsible for calling the attention of Californians to the vast storehouse of ornamental plants that were to be found within the state was Theodore Payne (1873-1963). Almost from the day he arrived in California until his death, Payne continued to be the great crusader for the appreciation and conservation of the native California flora. An anonymous writer in paying tribute to Payne wrote:

It was left to a young nurseryman emigrant from the little English village of Church Brampton, Northamptonshire, to inculcate in the minds of the people of California a knowledge and appreciation of the flora of their state. Theodore Payne grew up amongst flowers and trees and in his infant mind conceived a love for them that has not waned with the years. He never wished for any other career than that of a nurseryman, and at the age of sixteen his parents apprenticed him to a horticultural firm

In June, 1893, young Payne arrived in Los Angeles and began a search for work. For two or three days he picked apricots and then, hearing that Madame Modjeska, the famous actress, was looking for a gardener, he applied for the job, secured it and held it for two and a half years. In 1896 he took a position with the Germain Seed and Plant Company, where he stayed for seven years.

By this time he had seen something of the state and its great floral wealth. He viewed with dismay the gradual disappearance of wild flowers from the landscape, occasioned by ruthless picking without any thought of replanting. So he became a Californian of Californians and the first crusader on behalf of the native plants.

One of the first things he did after starting in business for himself in 1903 was to collect a variety of wild flower seeds and grow them for sale. It was of no use. Both trade and public seemed to despise the lowly wild flowers and would have none of them. Nothing daunted, he sowed to wild flowers a vacant lot in Hollywood and another in Pasadena through the courtesy of Walter Raymond of the Raymond Hotel. The consequent growth was very beautiful and attracted so much attention that it marked the beginning of wild flower planting on the present considerable scale. [1930] It led slowly but surely to the creation of the native California garden, which is taking its place alongside the English, Japanese, Italian and other gardens.

In 1915 Mr. Payne carried out a project which, perhaps more than anything else, furthered the fulfillment of his dreams. This was the planting of a garden containing nothing but Californian trees, shrubs and flowers in the grounds of Exposition Park. The five main groups of trees and 262 species of native plants were visited daily by thousands of people who expressed delighted surprise at the loveliness of the unusual exhibit.

For many years Mr. Payne has addressed gatherings in every large city in Southern California and has published many pamphlets, promoting the idea of California plants for California gardens¹⁸

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The Exposition Park planting of 1915 is important because it is the first time that an area had been landscaped and planted entirely with California plants. Payne's Exposition Park planting was only a short distance from the Bryant home on west 28th Street.

In commenting upon the Exposition Park planting, Guy L. Fleming wrote:

The May number of the 'California Garden' contains a notice of the Wild Flowers Garden in the Exposition Park at Los Angeles

It has been the dream of our president [Alfred D. Robinson] that the future home of the association [San Diego Floral Association] will be located in a tract of some acreage, and that this tract will contain not only lath gardens and fine examples of landscaping, but a certain part will be featured as a native garden showing all the plant life indigenous to San Diego County and its possible development as material for our gardens. And he never fails to call attention to the fact that a great many of our garden aristocrats trace their lineage to some California aborigine.

Some of the members of the San Diego Society of Natural History have also had dreams of a Wild Flower Garden. They had in mind a Botanical or Ecological Garden, showing the plantings in "associations" or "life zones."

Ecology, you will remember, is the study of plants in their relation to their surroundings or environment. It includes that part of botany which has to do with the way in which plants get on with their animal and plant neighbors, and in the way which they adjust themselves to the nature of the soil and climate in which they live.

Nature has arranged all life in groups, which are, in a general way, dependent on certain environmental conditions. These groups are called "associations" or "life zones."

The plan was to have a tract in the city park set aside for this Botanical Garden. Then to go out into the field and take photographs of the associations to be reproduced, and to make notes of the environmental conditions and as far as possible of the animal, bird, and insect life.

Each association would then be carefully reproduced on the site selected. All the plants plainly labeled, and a bulletin board placed showing a list of the birds and animals found in that society, with reference to the notes and specimens to be found in the museum of the Natural History Society. In this manner the different plant associations of the valleys, mountains and desert would be copied.

Such a collection would be of great value to a community, presenting as it would one of the most important departments of botany in an interesting and practical way.

Writing in 1916 of a Wild Flower Garden with the plantings arranged in ecological associations or life zones, Guy Fleming was many years ahead of his time as no American botanic garden had ever been planted in such a manner.

Guy Fleming was originally a rancher in Oregon and Washington and came to San Diego about 1908. For a time he was a member of the Little

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Landers Co. located at San Ysidro. During the San Diego Exposition he worked as chief ground's guide after having worked earlier in the nursery that grew plants for the Exposition. He later became District Superintendent of the California State Parks Southern District and for many years was associated with the Torrey Pines Preserve located at Del Mar.¹⁹

In 1917 the Bryants built a house in Los Angeles on West Adams Street and in addition to a tennis court there was an extensive rose garden and an area that Mrs Bryant later developed into a rock garden. In building it she had moved in from the ranch large boulders to give the garden authenticity and character. Many years before, Mrs Bryant's mother had built a cactus garden at Rancho Los Alamitos "boasting some imported sand to simulate a desert, but crying out for rocks and stones, which are not to be found in adobe soil."⁹ There is no way of knowing whether the earlier garden might have inspired Mrs Bryant in the construction of her rock garden in Los Angeles. But there can be little doubt she would have turned to Theodore Payne for seeds and plants for the garden.

By that time Payne had already published several price lists of *California Native Plants* and one of *California Wild Flowers*, the latter for the year 1917 listed over 100 species. Payne's first catalogue, *California Native Flower Seeds*, had been published sometime between 1906 and 1908; a copy of this extremely rare publication is at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, as are copies of nearly all of Payne's many publications. It is not known when Mrs Bryant and Theodore Payne met but according to Ernest A. Bryant, Jr, "they had been friends for years."²⁰

Following World War I, G. R. Gorton, editor of *The California Garden*, again brought up the matter of a botanic garden in San Diego, saying: "The question of a scientific botanical garden to be established in Balboa Park under the auspices of the Floral Association has again begun to show signs of life."²¹ According to the author, "Our idea of a suitable garden of this sort would be a strictly scientific garden for purposes of study." However, this proposed undertaking was to be more of a conventional botanic garden with plants from many areas of the world rather than the "Wild Flower Garden" advocated by Guy Fleming five years earlier.

In 1922 there appeared in *The California Garden* two important articles, advocating the use of native plants in landscaping; the first, "Native Plants for Landscape Work," appeared in May and the second, "Native Shrubs for Southern California Landscape Planting," appeared in the August issue. They were written by Peter D. Barnhart, an active landscape architect in the Pasadena area who was known for his use of new and rare materials.¹⁵ In the May issue Barnhart had written: "The reader of these lines must not for a moment think that the list of native herbaceous perennials here given are all that are desirable The idea is to awaken in the mind, the

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thought that we need not go to the uttermost parts of the earth to make a fine display of flowers in the gardens of the south half of the state."

In the second article Barnhart emphasized the fact that many native shrubs are quite intolerant of excess watering, pointing out how different they are in this respect from many exotics. He wrote that he was here attempting to channel gardeners' thoughts to the fact that

. . . this is a PECULIAR COUNTRY, and we should be a peculiar people, with a method of gardening peculiar to this climate and country.

There has been entirely too much copying after English, Scotch, French and Atlantic coast methods. We must have an individuality all our own. Let us be known the world over as a PECULIAR PEOPLE, with a style of gardening DISTINCTIVELY of our own creation, and when gardeners who really know the game, come this way, from far off lands, they will have something different to see

And finally, in the January 1924 issue of *The California Garden* there is Mira Culin Saunders's glowing account of the "Wild Rock Gardens of the Sierra Madre" where she wrote:

These natural gardens were full of suggestions for the creating of naturalesque rock gardens in our cultivated grounds. Their variety of form, their varying conditions of moisture, their reserve in the use of color, inspired much interesting thought; and above all their atmosphere of restfulness and quiet charm were enchanting. We speak of the prodigality of nature, but the more we observe her the more we find that her prodigality is harmonious, and that the plants of her tending grow with a happy abandon as though at home in their surroundings. By learning more of this art of nature's artlessness we might in our gardens accomplish the restful charm we find in the uncultivated places.

The stage was set for the appearance of one who was to make the dreams for a California Wild Garden come true.