

Q: I read on your website that The Ruth Bancroft Garden is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. Is this correct? How has the garden changed over the years, and what changes are on the horizon?

A: It is true that we are celebrating our 40th anniversary in 2012, since the garden was laid out, and the first plantings done, in 1972. However, it remained a private garden until 1993, when it was incorporated as a non-profit and opened to the public.

One of the major changes in the garden over the years has been the increase in canopy height, and accompanying shade, as the trees have matured. This has created a variety of micro-habitats, which have in turn affected the placement of new plantings. For example, some plants do well under a deciduous tree, where they receive shade during the hot summer months, but then get more sun in the winter when the leaves are shed. Cold-sensitive plants benefit from the degree of frost protection afforded by an overhead branch. Some species prefer the dappled light of a tree with sparse foliage, while others do well in a spot with sun during the morning hours, giving way to afternoon shade.

At 40 years of age, some of our shorter-lived trees are reaching the end of their life-span. A few have declined or died over the past year or so, and more will undoubtedly reach that point in the coming years. One of our ongoing challenges is to adapt to the changes brought on by older trees coming out, combined with new ones growing in. After all, a garden is a living, growing tapestry rather than a static object.

2011 was a year of big changes at The Ruth Bancroft Garden. With help from Hanson Quarry, on the north slope of Mt. Diablo, we were able to get a new supply of rock which is a good match for the original rock obtained back in the seventies. This new material has enabled us to build up new mounds in the course of renovating some of the beds which needed better drainage. More bed renovations will be occurring this year. The addition of rock and the creation of raised beds is important for improving drainage, which is less than ideal in our heavy clay soil.

In recent years, our community outreach efforts have greatly expanded. We now have a wide variety of workshops, seminars, demonstrations, book-signings and festive events. Each summer we host a sculpture show, and we have big plant sales in spring, summer and fall. With a visit to our website (www.ruthbancroftgarden.org), you can see all the events planned for this year.

