

## **Berkeley: Garden director keeps a foot planted in the past**

- Harriet Chiang, Chronicle Staff Writer  
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On a leisurely walk through the Regional Parks Botanic Garden, Steve Edwards has a story for almost every native flower, shrub and tree that he passes.

"This is an incredible plant," he said, resting his hand on a Sonoma Sage. "It suppresses weeds, it won't burn, deer won't eat it. And when it blooms it's a carpet of purple flowers."

Edwards paused in front of a row of Franciscan manzanitas flourishing next to a rushing creek. The shrub was plucked from extinction at the Laurel Hill Cemetery in San Francisco almost 60 years ago by Jim Roof, the garden's founding director. "He got in just before the bulldozer blades," Edwards recalled with a smile.

As director of the regional parks garden in Berkeley's Tilden Park, Edwards oversees one of the most significant collections of California native plants in the state. Majestic black oaks, Joshua trees and Alaska cedars are among the trees that grace the garden. Prickly pears with pink-tipped fruit and other varieties of cacti and succulents thrive near the front entrance. And waterfalls, a running stream, and a maze of paths accent an array of flora and rock formations scattered throughout the 10-acres of botanic tapestry.

"This is the best job in the world," said Edwards, 54, who began working in the garden in 1970 and has been director since 1983. "The garden is so beautiful and so diverse. And everyone is really dedicated to learning about native plants and doing field work and growing them."

Edwards is not your typical horticulturalist or botanist. In many ways, he seems as though he's from another era.

He has a background in geology, medieval philosophy, fossil mammals and African prehistoric archaeology. While studying for his doctorate in paleobotany -- the study of plant fossils -- he mapped Round Top volcano in Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve, spending a year crawling through gulches in the Oakland hills armed with a topographical map.

And among his many accomplishments, he is especially proud of his skill at flint knapping -- the ancient art of crafting pieces of stone into arrowheads, spearheads and knives.

"I love everything prehistoric," said the Berkeley resident. "I can't explain why. Some people want to explore the cosmos. I want to know what was a long time ago. It has an incredible romance to me."

With his beard and tall, lanky build, Edwards, who is single, fits the image of the environmentalist, resembling a young John Muir. His primary passion is his work, and he has worked tirelessly to make the garden part of the community, creating volunteer and docent programs and setting up tours, weekend talks, and educational programs. About 80,000 visitors tour the garden each year, enjoying almost 2,000 plants.

Colleagues call him brilliant with an incredible breadth of knowledge about plants, geology and the regional park district.

"He's very much in touch with the land and the plants and the natural history of the area," said Pat O'Brien, general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District. He noted that Edwards has helped preserve numerous California plants, thanks to an uncanny ability to coax plants to grow that are quickly vanishing in other environments.

Edwards also is good with people, able to share his vast knowledge without coming off as distant, O'Brien said. "He's into communication," O'Brien said. "He's perfect for the job."

"He's one of the brightest, highly educated persons that the district's ever had on its work force," said Jerry Kent, who worked for the park district for 41 years before retiring as assistant general manager. "He's combined geology and history and paleontology and horticulture in a really unique way and has the garden looking the best I've ever seen it."

"He probably wishes he was there 100 years ago. He's a renaissance man."

Edwards is as attuned to the present as the past, Kent said. "Steve has brought the garden into the 21st century."

Edwards discovered his love of the outdoors when he was a boy growing up in Oakland. His father, a representative for a hardware company, and his mother, a landscape and wildlife water color painter, would take Edwards and his two brothers on camping trips in the mountains. His mother, who had an enormous influence on him, used to pick up seedlings of Jeffrey pines and bring them home to grow. He won his own blue ribbons in grammar school for his cacti. "I've just always been plant happy my whole life," he said.

He attended St. Mary's College, graduating summa cum laude with a college medal in philosophy. While there, he applied for a summer job at the UC Botanical Garden. They only hired UC students and steered him toward the Regional Parks Botanic Garden. "Wow," he thought. "That's a great second-best."

Edwards earned his master's degree in fossil mammals at UC Berkeley. While studying for his doctorate, he became fascinated with African prehistory and went to Ethiopia in 1977 to do archeological work.

"I have too many hobbies," he said with a chuckle. "I never grew up. I just got bigger."

He remembers Roof advising him to do what he loved and eventually someone would pay him for it. Edwards, who was working as a ranger in the garden, followed his advice and switched to paleobotany for his doctorate. "I wanted to stay in the garden the rest of my life," he explained.

While he was preparing for his oral exams he wanted to improve his skills in geology. So Edwards, not the type to dabble, decided to map the geology of the volcanic terrain in Sibley. "It was an incredible fruit waiting to be plucked," Edwards said.

Within weeks after receiving his doctorate, he fulfilled his long-held dream of becoming director of the garden. "I'd wake up in the morning and I'd see the sun and I was exploding with joy to be working," he recalled.

His knowledge of the past inspires his crusade to preserve endangered native plants. Decades ago, he said that artists would set up their easels next to the Brazil room and paint the sheets of wildflowers that covered the hillside overlooking the garden. But most of the flowers vanished in 1939 after the introduction of the eucalyptus trees, which cast huge swaths of shade and a mishmash of fallen limbs and shredded bark.

Each year, he and his crew, which includes four gardeners, a part-time office assistant, and numerous volunteers, introduce new plants and trees to the garden, whether it's a cluster of Idaho Fescue ornamental blue grass he gathered from Del Norte County or a towering pine. "I grew that from a seedling," he said, standing next to a 30-foot Port-Orford-cedar. Even the rocks, some of which have been carted in from the Sierra, are carefully arranged to resemble a volcanic outcrop or the tip of an iceberg.

In the winter, when much of the garden is dormant and the perennials and annuals are invisible, Edwards enjoys the quiet serenity. "I like every time of year," he said as he stood by a grove of white, slender aspens.

In many ways, Edwards regards the varied plant life as well as the crew and volunteers who tend to the garden as part of an extended family. Even a cat named Big Foot who used to lead people on tours around the garden was given a fitting memorial when he died.

"He covers so much ground so eloquently," said Dan Reasor, a former park supervisor at Sunol Regional Wilderness and a close friend of Edwards'. "The Bay Area has no idea how lucky they are to have him running that garden."

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Learn more

Steve Edwards will talk on the botany of Point Reyes at 10:30 a.m. Jan. 7 at the visitor center of the Regional Parks Botanic Garden in Berkeley as part of the weekly lecture series. (510) 841-8732; [www.nativeplants.org](http://www.nativeplants.org). To get to the garden, take Grizzly Peak Blvd. and turn onto Golf Course Road into Tilden Regional Park and follow the signs toward the Brazil Room. The garden is just past it.

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Page F - 1

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