

## Western Hills Enters a New Era

*The Garden Conservancy featured Western Hills on the cover of our newsletter last spring and has been very involved in finding a solution for its preservation. Freelance writers Joe Eaton and Ron Sullivan, who wrote an article on Western Hills in the San Francisco Chronicle ([www.sfgate.com](http://www.sfgate.com)) on September 1, contributed this latest update.*

For a few months earlier this year, Western Hills, an enormously influential and much-



**Looking up at Western Hills: five arborists and a volunteer's daughter assess pruning needs overhead.**

loved garden near Occidental in Sonoma County, California, was in foreclosure. A dedicated core group of volunteers [organized by the Garden Conservancy] tended to its unique collection of plants while its future was unknown. We are all

fortunate that the new owners, Tim and Chris Szybalski, are in it for the long run, committed to stabilizing the garden and upgrading its infrastructure. They hope to have Western Hills open to the public in a year or so. The Garden Conservancy is in conversation with and assisting the new owners and volunteers.

When we visited this summer for the first time in over a decade, the changes were apparent. Vistas had been obscured by tree and vine growth; sunny borders had evolved into shade

gardens. But what photographer Saxon Holt calls “the bones of the garden,” the magnificent zelkova, the exotic maples, the distinctive layers of trees and multiple understories, had endured.

“We have no master plan except to save the garden so people can enjoy it again,” said Chris Szybalski, co-owner of Westbrae Nursery in Berkeley. That began with reclaiming the maze of paths, repairing the wooden bridges, clearing the invasive parrot’s-feather out of the main pond, and shoring up the greenhouse structures. Volunteer coordinator Stacie Miller cleaned out the hand-dug culverts. Tim Szybalski, a management consultant, has focused on the irrigation system: “There are lots of different diameters of pipe. Every hole is a surprise.”

The Szybalskis also have had help from Bob Hornback, owner of Muchas Grasses Nursery; arborist Ted Kipping, who assessed the condition of the trees; Tim’s cousin Sean Hogan, who interned at Western Hills and now owns Cistus Nursery in Portland; former owner Maggie Wych, and a host of Bay Area horticulturists. It’s clearly a labor of love for all of them.

Still informed by the interests and design ideas of its founders Lester Hawkins and Marshall Olbrich, Western Hills continues to evolve. “It’s not the same garden it was thirty years ago,” volunteer Betsy Flack said. “And I don’t think anyone anticipates it will be the same ten or fifteen years from now. But it’s not going to be someone’s mansion and lawn. We’re going to have a chance to relish its old age.”

## Hollister House Garden Study Weekend Sells Out



George Schellkopf

The second Hollister House Garden Study Weekend, presented by Hollister House Garden and the Garden Conservancy, drew sellout crowds on August 27–29. The weekend’s success derived at least in part from a rich agenda of activities ending with an Open Day on Sunday with tours of six exciting gardens in surrounding Litchfield County, Connecticut. The weekend began with a cocktail supper and silent auction at Hollister House on Friday evening and a symposium with talks by Peter

Wirtz, Margaret Roach, Page Dickey, Dick Button, and Jill Nokes—as well as plant picks by nurserymen Hitch Lyman and Adam Wheeler—on Saturday. Extensive offerings of plants and a book sale on Saturday allowed symposium participants and the public to shop for rare plants and the latest books in the field. In the words of Hollister House volunteer and board member Betsy Manning, who spearheaded the event, it was “an intensive weekend for garden nuts who cannot get enough gardening in.”