

The secret garden

by Lisa Hersch, College of Agriculture

Virginia Walter, head of the Environmental Horticultural Science Department (EHS), calls the Leaning Pine Arboretum the College of Agriculture's best-kept secret.



The five-acre site is nestled against the hills at the north end of campus. As students rush through the campus core below, pines and palms provide serene shade in this hidden patch of paradise.

But the arboretum is not a conservatory. It is a living environment that is always changing — with the seasons and with the students who use it as an outdoor laboratory for senior and class projects to study plants they will work with in their careers.

The arboretum was created in the early '70s to display California native plants and some Australian flora that were ecologically adapted to the local climate. When EHS Professor Tom Eltzroth took over the care and running of the arboretum in the early '90s, he began a second genesis toward restoration by bringing in Mediterranean plants. Using plants from regions like Australia, Chile, South Africa, and, of course, the Mediterranean Basin itself, was not new to California. These plants do well in the state and have been used in urban gardens and available in nurseries for

decades. What was novel was creating separate areas within the arboretum featuring plants from each region.

"The *Leaning Pine* Arboretum allows students to study plants in their natural settings, not just in rows with labels. These plants are actually set up in a landscape as they would be in a public or private setting," says Eltzroth. "Students who train here are ready to venture into the landscape industry. We don't just give them part of the garden and let them do anything they like. Students submit a plant palette, along with a layout of the section indicating where pathways will go, which vistas will be retained, and how drainage and irrigation will be maintained. New varieties of plants

are brought in to see how they co-exist with established plants."

Even though some areas have an individual student's imprint, the arboretum remains a team effort. All EHS students attend at least two classes where they experience the outdoor lab that the arboretum provides, and student employees help maintain the grounds.





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(Photo courtesy College of Agriculture)

Meg Abel (EHS '00) says, "One of the best things about working in the arboretum — over and above simply being in this vibrant learning environment — was working with the faculty and other students and really getting to know each other."

Abel, who is interested in pursuing a career

in public horticulture, including garden design, management, and plant research, chose to come to Cal Poly because of its hands-on learning environment. "I wanted to work with plants and watch them grow and be beautiful, not just study them under a microscope."

Eltzroth notes that managing the arboretum remains an interesting challenge. "Students are here three or four years and then they're gone. But there are advantages too. We work hard and end up with some great results."

The arboretum is almost entirely self-supporting with the help of individual or corporate garden sponsors. For example, the Australian collection recently received an endowment from The Ambassador Bill and Jean Lane Fund to support its collection and to create a brochure highlighting the arboretum's beauty. Environmental Care Inc. has also sponsored the Australian collection for a number of years. The Mediterranean garden is supported by the Paul Ecke Family, and portions of the California collection are supported by Carson Landscape Industries and the Lompoc Valley Botanic & Horticultural Society. Additionally, the Formal and Topiary garden is supported by Cagwin & Dorward, while the Palm garden is sponsored by South Coast Plaza / Crystal Court.

Walter credits today's arboretum to Eltzroth and the students who work there. "They've put their hearts and souls into making the arboretum a truly exceptional environment." 

