

## Digging Deep

# A Short Romp in the Ruth Bancroft Gardens

By Cynthia Brian

*"Who cares if I'm not around? If I don't plant it, then nobody will get to see it!" — Ruth Bancroft*



*This opuntia prickly pear cactus in the Ruth Bancroft Garden bears purple tuna fruit ready to be tasted.*

*Photos Cynthia Brian*

Since as long as I can remember I have always said that I wanted to live to be 108 years old. Why I chose that number I have no idea as I had never met anyone who lived to be 108...until this week when I met Ruth Bancroft, creator of the Ruth Bancroft Gardens in Walnut Creek. Ruth turned 108 years young on Sept. 2 and I was privileged enough to celebrate her birthday with bubbly and her favorite chocolate cake in her masterpiece dry gardens that she began planting in the 1970s.

Bancroft's gardening passion began as a child in Berkeley. When she moved through the tunnel to Walnut Creek she became a "collector." Her efforts, trials, tribulations and experiences along the way are chronicled in the new Timber Press book, "The Bold Dry Garden," penned by Johanna Silver, the garden editor

of Sunset magazine, and photographed by Marion Brenner. With the entire West Coast on drought alert, the Ruth Bancroft Gardens are a model for low-water plantscaping. If you have ever been curious about succulents, cacti, yuccas, and other desert plants that will flourish in the East Bay, this beautiful book will become an essential reference guide.

Our local water company states that water use was 24 percent less in 2015 than it was in 2014, saving enough water to fill the Oakland Coliseum 71 times! As homeowners rip out lawns in favor of xeriscaping, we'll focus on the benefits of adding low maintenance, low water use plants and planting them NOW in your garden.

Although I have a lifetime of gardening experience, I'm not sure that I will ever become an expert

in any one area of horticulture, as gardens are living, breathing, evolving, growing entities that are constantly changing. What I adore about Bancroft's garden is this consistent evolution. Each time I visit, a new vista or display greets me, even from the same specimens as the first visit. The colors, textures and sizes are in perpetual motion, from California natives to the canopy of trees, the rosettes of terrestrial bromeliads to the swords of the yuccas.

Here are a few of Bancroft's prized collection that you can grow in your garden for your benefit and that of your great-grandchildren's children.

**Aeoniums:** One of the most popular plants of all of the succulents, aeoniums have lovely fleshy rosettes that will reach towards the heavens, mound in purgatory or cascade towards hell. They prefer a bit of shade and are easy to cultivate and grow in the ground and in containers.

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*Encephalartos horridus was Ruth Bancroft's first cycad—very prickly and scary plant.*