

The Register-Guard: Home: City/Region

Cultivating Delight

Gardening enthusiasts are working to preserve an Oregon man's grand experiment

By Winston Ross

The Register-Guard

Published: April 14, 2008 12:00AM



Winston Ross/The Register-Guard

Kathleen Sand cradles a rhododendron 'Else Frye' at the Gerdemann garden, which she and her husband hope to turn into a nature preserve.

YACHATS — The Gerdemann garden has always been something of an experiment.

Could Tasmanian tree ferns share the same soil with native skunk cabbage? Would Vireya rhododendrons, which hail from the tropics, survive a January Oregon Coast freeze? Can the gigantic African honeybush thrive in a place that looks and feels nothing like its homeland?

Jim Gerdemann never wanted a perfect garden, something landscaped and tidy with hedges neatly trimmed and bushes immaculately pruned. What the botanist and plant pathologist wanted was to create a new ecosystem — a new mingling of native, exotic and hybrid flora and fauna that no one had ever before imagined, much less laid eyes upon.

“There’s no point in planting things you see on the way to the grocery store,” Gerdemann said.

After 25 years, his mission is accomplished. The 3.5-acre parcel filled with

spruce and hemlock trees that Gerdemann and his wife, Janice, have tended carefully is as wild as it is pristine, as random as it is in harmony.

When a storm blows down one of the seven different species of eucalyptus trees, Gerdemann removes it only if it blocks one of the winding paths that snake through this idyllic canopy on the edge of the Siuslaw National Forest. If it falls, it'll be a nurse log for a fern, or compost for a generation of trilliums, moss and lichens.

Why? "Because I like it that way," Gerdemann says with a smirk.

The Gerdemann garden is a treasure that has lured scientists, naturalists, gardeners, researchers and students from all over the world for visits, to the point that it may be better-known internationally than locally.

But its creator has gotten on in years; at 87, there are painful repercussions that last for days if he ventures out of the house to tend his sprawling nursery. So the couple decided last year it was time to sell the place and move somewhere more manageable.

But who would keep the experiment alive? In the wrong hands, the property could be chopped up seven different ways and parceled out to fetch tidy profits for developers and builders at the expense of Gerdemann's two-plus decades of effort.

Needless to say, that's not the fate the Gerdemanns wanted for their beloved landscape. So they went on a hunt for just the right buyer, in the way Willy Wonka looked for the appropriate heir to his chocolate factory.

Along came Jerry and Kathleen Sand. He's a landscape architect who spent 20 years persuading Seattle transplants to the San Juan Islands to develop their properties in ways that conform with their new surroundings, not invade it. She's an elementary school teacher with all the energy and enthusiasm of a first-grader, and a love of the outdoors through which to channel that passion.

"There's all sorts of things in this little greenhouse," a bubbling Kathleen Sand said on a trip to the garden last Wednesday. "Things you can't pronounce."

They were ideal candidates. But they couldn't afford the Gerdemann garden.

Luckily, there are solutions to problems like that, especially where preserving such a botanical feast is involved. As word spread of the effort to protect the Gerdemann garden, the local nonprofit View the Future got involved. By last fall, the organization had found two donors in local residents Greg and Nan Scott, who were willing to kick in \$100,000 toward the purchase of the property, provided that a special conservation easement was attached to the deed.

That easement ensures that the Sands won't subdivide the garden, that they'll develop a trail network and create outreach programs and, if they sell the property, that the next owners will adhere to the same restrictions.

But the new caretakers aren't satisfied with just preserving the resource as it is; they're imagining a full-fledged conservancy with trails that connect to a network

in the Siuslaw forest and other parts of town, with educational opportunities for students of all ages, and with regular public access, even though the Sands will be living in the house that overlooks the property.

Last Saturday, the couple kicked off an endowment effort designed to raise \$1 million for maintenance, improvements and education and apprenticeship programs. There were public tours of the garden, a rare opportunity to glimpse Jim Gerdemann's lasting legacy.

[Copyright © 2007 — The Register-Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA](http://regweb.registerguard.com/rga/index.php/info/copyright)
<http://regweb.registerguard.com/rga/index.php/info/copyright>
