

# Branching out

## CABRILLO COLLEGE OPENS \$5M 'DREAM' HORTICULTURE CENTER-BOTANICAL GARDENS



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Lab assistant Kathe Navarez waters the young plants as visitors tour Cabrillo College's horticulture center and botanical gardens.

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At first glance, the barren, scraped hilltop above Cabrillo College appears an unlikely spot for a horticulture center and botanical gardens. The bulldozed hilltop is devoid of trees and plants, except for those growing in pots inside greenhouses.

However, the 11-acre site overlooking the Pacific Ocean will blossom in the next several years as the botanical gardens sprout with native plants, succulents and tropicals.

By **CAROLYN LEAL**  
Sentinel correspondent

The sophisticated greenhouse complex can make adjustments for heat and cold and has classrooms wired for multimedia presentations, which are ready for horticulture students. A retail nursery will be up and running by fall and a garden store is planned for 2004.

"Build a garden, and they will come," quipped Rich Merrill, horticulture program director.

The new horticulture center is a vision come true for Merrill and some 600 horticulture students at Cabrillo College.

"I feel like I'm in a dream," Merrill said.

It was conceived 20 years ago, occupied 10 years of dreaming and two years of planning and construction.

The state-of-the-art center is not just for college students, Merrill said.

"We hope to focus on community activities also. The goal was to develop a world-class horticulture center and botanical gardens," he said.



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The atrium in Cabrillo College's new Environmental Horticulture Center has views of Big Sur on a clear day.



# Cabrillo

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The \$5 million facility was built with a combination of bond and state funds, committed several years ago. But the center's opening comes at a time when community colleges are facing reduced state funding and cutbacks in programs and staff.

"This is an odd juxtaposition," admitted Cabrillo College president John Hurd, who was greeted with applause at the dedication last week. "I had a horrendous budget talk this morning and no one applauded there."

Hurd said the college faces \$4 million to \$5 million in cuts from next year's budget and a 6-8 percent cut in next year's classes as well as a reduction in staff.

"We have to make some painful choices," he said.

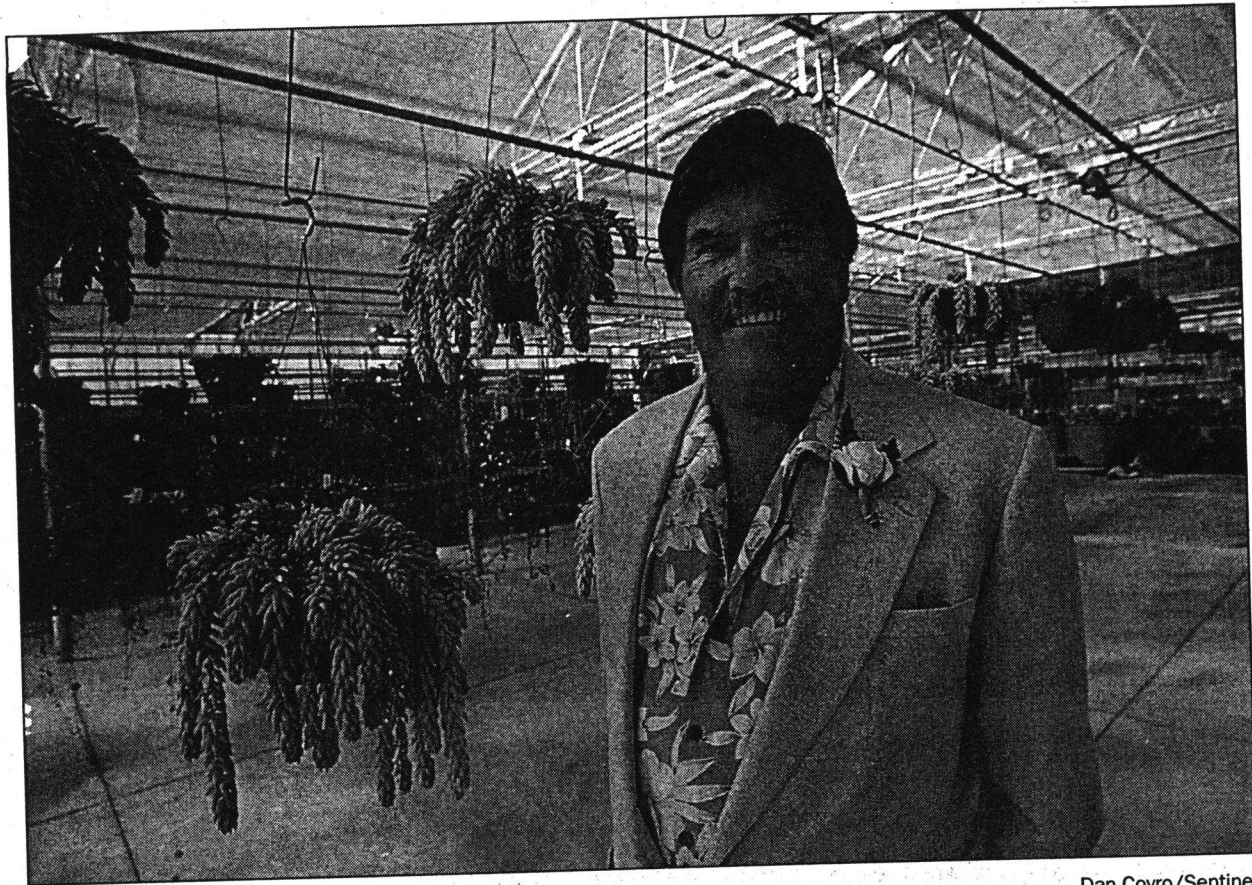
However, Merrill said he didn't want to talk about budget cuts, as he led a VIP tour of the greenhouse complex, which features a water system that both purifies and recycles water. The complex is climate controlled and features rolling stainless steel nursery tables for plant propagation.

"A unique computer-controlled shade system blocks the sun during the day and reflects the heat back at night," Merrill said. "There's no greenhouse room like this in the entire community college system."

A 3,000-gallon-a-day reverse osmosis unit purifies water for plants and returns recycled water to the greenhouse, he said. Special lines inject fertilizer and circulate hot water to bedding plants.

"They don't call it a nursery for nothing," Merrill said.

The new horticulture center will allow the college to expand vocational paths for students who could find jobs in the thriving horticulture industry in the area, Merrill said. Stu-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Horticulture Program Director Rich Merrill in the new Environmental Horticulture Center at Cabrillo College.

dents could be prepared for such jobs as landscape architects and designers, florists and retail nursery workers, he said.

"There are lots of job opportunities here for students, and it's also a place for home gardeners," he said.

Some \$350,000 has been donated to outfit the center, much of it from local growers. Max Koppes of Watsonville, who develops strawberry hybrids, donated \$250,000.

Cabrillo College has one of the largest collections of ornamental salvias in the world, Merrill said. The

collection will be expanded and showcased along with collections of fuchsias, native plants and water plants.

The hilltop site was cut down 12 feet to flatten it out, Merrill said, pointing to several large piles of top soil. Horse manure will be mixed with the top soil and eventually 5 acres of gardens will be planted, he said.

"I'm overwhelmed. It's a wonderful facility," Merrill said.

He had praise for the architectural firm of Thacher and Thompson, which designed the beige and green buildings.

Cabrillo College broke ground on the project in May 2001. The south complex includes a small retail store, staff offices, a classroom, a learning center and a community room. The north complex includes the nursery, a propagation classroom, greenhouses, shade houses; five small hoop greenhouses for individual climates, a tool shed with seed room and a large work area.

Classes at the new center started Monday.

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