

City Hall -

Wally Trabing's Mostly about People



3-21-71

A Salute To A Gardener

Quietly, one of the most unsung tourist attractions in the county is drawing those of aesthetic bent to its epicenter.

The Spanish Gardens, where, incidentally the Santa Cruz City Hall is located, are exploding with color.

There isn't the ballyhoo here associated with the usual attraction.

They come with cameras, having heard of the gardens from afar. Word gets around. Salesmen who specialize in government supplies and who visit city halls throughout the state and U.S. rate this one the best in the state and nation for small cities.

Local residents bring visitors to show off the heart of the city.

Mrs. Robert Kinzie, 433 Van Ness Ave., is one of them.

"I'm thrilled over our gardens. We can count on new floral surprises whenever we go down there and I like to feel that my taxes are going for something like this," she said.

As far back as 1952 the square was rated by the International City Managers Association as sharing "the most remarkable city halls in the U.S.," with Richmond, Calif., and Boulder, Colo.

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Now, in its prelude to Spring, an army of yellow daffodils is on parade; masses of ranunculus bedazzle the eyes; Shasta daisies are bursting like skyrockets; and there is a grand show of orchid-like nemesia.

Whenever people come here there seems to dwell in them a need to shout, "Gardener! Gardener!" at the end of an inspired concert.

The man they seek and usually find is Rich Criswell, 28, a protege of the late Tod Gresham, who has gone it alone for over two years as gardener.

They seek him out for praising, to ask "What's that?" and sometimes, "How do I get rid of crabgrass?"

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Criswell is a handsome man, built like a delphinium spike—thin and straight. Modest and friendly, he's a congenial conversationalist but he can cuss like hell when the subject changes to enemies of his garden—free roaming dogs, thoughtless idiots who pick the flowers at night or trample through the beds.

But these gardens reflect the rough hewn hands of others in the past. Such as Al Verlinde who left as a legacy a giant hibiscus near the police department wing that produces over 100 blooms at a time.

Charles Robb and Earl Pracht worked here and Gresham left his magnificent magnolia trees (also called tulip trees), some varieties of which he developed himself.

Criswell, who lives at 304 National St., went to work for Gresham three years ago. It was just a job, but something within him took root.

"You know, there are times when a guy doesn't want to get up and go to work. Well, it's never happened since I took this over. I knew I had found my nitch," he said.

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There is an overall pleasantness about the garden's form and line at the front entrance. And as you walk about the mood changes from the exciting flow of varicolored primroses ("Man are they expensive"), iris, azaleas, stock, to the more luxurious sophistication of ferns, rhododendrons and orchids; and then again the mood shifts to the home-like phalanxes of roses, and again to a delicate play of tiny flowers in the inner court.

Criswell gets nervous as a cat when large crowds assemble at the civic auditorium or city council chambers. He gets nervous on weekends off and often "patrols" past his antiseptic empire.

He reworks his beds three times a year, adding mulch and fertilizer and dresses them with a material which uses human waste as an ingredient.

He sets out plants by the hundreds. They spring into growth like cheerleaders after a touchdown.

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There are surprises—the bay trees with rounded heads guarding the front broken down fountain; the echium shrub with its tall, purple spikes, the orchids, Bird of Paradise plants and Hollywood juniper.

Roy Rydell, noted landscape architect, believes that the garden is so outstanding that it "probably improves the citizen's attitude toward local government."

It is ironic that the men who create and sustain this loveliness are not more highly feted.

When this country begins building statutes of gardeners instead of generals, we can consider ourselves civilized.