

GARDEN NOTEBOOK; Moving Lock, Stock and Trowel

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LIKE many Americans, I've moved several times, from home to home and garden to garden. I grew houseplants in a tenement in Providence, R.I., planted containers on a SoHo rooftop and dug rubble behind a Brooklyn brownstone. I now tend an island garden in a river in New Jersey.

Visitors assume this is where I will spend the rest of my life. But I think of my garden as a work in progress, not a final resting place. When the valley seems a little too shady, or a big box store breaks ground on a neighboring farm, I think about trading up. I might start over if I can find a larger, more secluded place on higher ground. The grass, it seems, is greenest on the other side of the garden fence.

When news came through the gardening grapevine that Roger Raiche and David McCrory were selling their property in the Berkeley hills, most people I spoke to reacted with horror. It was as if Monet was putting Giverny on the block.

This may be my favorite garden of all -- not for its architecture or vistas, but for the plantings made with astonishing precision. The detail of intricate plant combinations, blendings of texture and form, even shadow, are carefully planned and maintained.

Mr. Raiche, who retires this week from his job as a horticulturist at the University of California at Berkeley, and his partner, Mr. McCrory, a garden designer, are moving an hour north to a 25-acre vineyard with three houses and a redwood glen near Sebastopol, Calif. There they will run a bed-and-breakfast and a nursery and expand their landscape design business. The men will also be closer to their weekend retreat, the Cedars, another hour north of San Francisco. "We've gardened on a tiny spot in Berkeley," said Mr. McCrory, 33. "Now we're going to do some macro gardening."

I met Mr. Raiche in 1990 when I visited the Botanical Garden on the Berkeley campus, where he is until tomorrow in charge of the Northeastern American native plant collections and the resident expert in local flora. I first saw him perched on a rock, a muscular bronzed figure with wavy russet hair and matching mustache. Now 50, the gruff kid has become a mountain goat, hair shorn and peppered with gray, but still scrambling across the hillside in his Berkeley garden.

Mr. Raiche is usually quiet, but when he talks about plants, chlorophyll courses through his veins and he energetically describes smooth stems, jagged leaves and colorful seed pods. With roughly 10,000 plants in his garden, there is a lot to talk about without leaving home.

Mr. Raiche has the luxury of living in a climate with a 10-month gardening season. But unlike San Francisco, Berkeley has temperatures that can dip into the 30's, providing some rest for magnolias and other plants that require a period of winter dormancy to flower. On the other hand, without the fog that shrouds the city, the Berkeley summer is sunny and warm. Consequently heat-loving subtropicals, like fuchsia, which gardeners normally keep as potted plants, can be grown right in the ground. Lilacs and lemons live side by side. Begonias bloom next to bananas. And nearly any Mediterranean plant -- lavender, rosemary and sage -- thrives here.

For 15 years, Mr. Raiche and Mr. McCrory have lived smack in the middle of a quarter-acre garden in a cottage designed by Bernard Maybeck, a seminal figure in the San Francisco Arts and Crafts movement. Maybeck built the cottage in 1924 with bubblestone, a fireproof siding made from burlap sacks dipped in concrete, after several Berkeley houses, including his own, were destroyed by a fire in 1923.

Mr. Raiche rented the cottage in 1988 from Maybeck's daughter-in-law. She was strict about limiting improvements, and she refused to let Mr. Raiche do away with the lawn. It became a constant point of contention. To subtly defy her edict, Mr. Raiche planted a symbol of the vanishing lawn right on top of it: he installed a vintage push mower, tipped on one wheel and spewing a living wake of planted multicolor grasses and sedges.

That composition is gone now, along with the lawn. In fact the garden has always been in a state of change. When I visited it earlier this month, I found a good part of the landscape transformed from a year ago, with a new paved patio and a seven-foot-tall urn from Spain, the kind still used to store olive oil.

The men bought the cottage in 1997 and set about repairing and renovating it with help from Jay Turnbull, a San Francisco architect and Maybeck scholar. Two years ago, the building was lifted and a new foundation poured beneath it, and a second floor addition was built around the original cottage, which received landmark designation last year.

Mr. McCrory fields most questions about the garden and renovation, and many of those about Mr. Raiche's personal history as well. Mr. McCrory moved to Berkeley in 1990 to study horticulture; he interned at the botanical garden in 1995. Two years later, he and Mr. Raiche started their own landscape design business, Planet Horticulture, known for plant-intensive designs like the botanical smorgasbord Mr. Raiche and Mr. McCrory are leaving behind.

Both men say their garden was enormously influenced by Marcia Donahue, a sculptor whose Berkeley house and garden double as a gallery. Her assemblage of ceramics and other artworks prompted Mr. Raiche to construct fountains, tiny bridges, and a bench made of concrete chunks salvaged from the cleanup site of the Cypress Freeway, which collapsed in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. He tinted the bench rusty-red by applying a solution containing iron sulfate. A local sculptor, Mark Bulwinkle, fashioned gates and handrails from freeway rebar -- also from the cleanup.

Mr. Raiche bought and propagated thousands of exotics for his garden, but he recognizes the purity of the native ecosystem that surrounds it, and steers clear of potentially invasive plants. This is the difference between Mr. Raiche's refined gardening and the plant gluttony of a less knowledgeable collector.

After spending time with Mr. Raiche, I began to further appreciate the distinction between growing plants in a garden and knowing plants in the wild. For almost 20 years, he has traveled nearly every weekend to the serpentine mountains near the town of Cazadero, Calif., where he treks the rugged terrain observing and recording the indigenous flora in photographs and notebooks.

Over the years, he returned frequently to a private 520-acre tract, with a deep canyon and abandoned chromium mines. Two years ago, Mr. Raiche managed to buy this land, which he calls the Cedars for the indigenous juniper species growing among the rocks. Mr. Raiche took me to see the land earlier this month. To get there, he turned his S.U.V. off the Bohemian Highway and onto a narrow dirt road, parts of which had been washed out by 30 inches of winter rain. He sped over the rough road, steering with one hand, the other holding Serpentino, a cocker spaniel-poodle mix, while Koa, a Tibetan terrier, sat beside him. We passed short-grass oak savanna and lone trees dripping with moss. This is the homeland of *Calochortus raichei*, a wild meadow bulb with yellow flowers named for its discoverer. After crossing four rushing streams, we continued on foot. The air was filled with the scent of native bay trees, a mix of citrus and cinnamon spiked with kerosene. Thousands of deciduous azaleas grew in thickets along the banks of the swollen creek that empties into the Russian River just before it reaches the Pacific Ocean.

After crossing the seventh watercourse, we arrived at a barren red clay landscape that looked a bit like Mars. We climbed 4,300 feet on a zigzag path Mr. Raiche had built himself, passing moisture seeps where I could see the burgundy-leafed river orchid he discovered, *Epipactis gigantea* Serpentine Night. Along the way, he identified every blade of grass, every tiny cress.

The attraction of the Cedars is so great that the two men sold their house and garden earlier this month and moved north. Now they are champing at the bit to start again. The new owner of their Berkeley garden is experiencing her own version of greener pastures, trading a neat lawn and tennis courts for what must seem to her like nature primeval. The men have clients in the Berkeley hills, and they have offered to stop by to help guide the garden's progress.

One thing that will not change, and which I will miss, is the spectacular view of San Francisco Bay, and the play of afternoon light on the giant red-hot poker, the *Stipa gigantea*, with the largest flowers of any grass, and New Zealand flax, with translucent arching blades of maroon, bronze, cream and orange.

Mr. Raiche and Mr. McCrory are not abandoning their old garden so much as adopting a tabula rasa. "I think I have energy for one more garden," Mr. Raiche said. I am reminded of a glazed ceramic decoration in their garden, an old cemetery ornament depicting a book with

roses across the cover and the title "Regrets." I don't think the ornament went with them.

I can easily identify with their move. I could leave the garden in New Jersey, although I am in no hurry to do so. We gardeners are not always as attached to our properties as people might think. It is gardening we love, and that comes with us.

Sundays In a Garden With Ideas

THE garden design and landscaping firm owned by Roger Raiche and David McCrory, called Planet Horticulture, does custom work: www.planethorticulture.com for information.

To see the work of two sculptors who have influenced Mr. Raiche and Mr. McCrory, you may drop by the Berkeley house and garden of Marcia Donahue, who makes pieces in stone and ceramic, and Mark Bulwinkle, who made the gates and handrails in the former Raiche-McCrory garden. The sculptors' house and garden double as Our Own Stuff Gallery Garden. The gallery-garden is open to the public on Sunday afternoons. Information: (510) 540-8544.