

Mission Hills Garden Walk marks nursery's 100th year

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By Ann Jarmusch
SDUN Reporter



Oh, to be remembered by clouds of blue heather, majestic Queen palms, feathery rows of California pepper trees and pale yellow Reve d'Or roses spilling across tall arbors.

These are just a few of the plants Kate Sessions (1857-1940) introduced or recommended to San Diego during her remarkable half-century career as a pioneering nurserywoman, florist, plant importer and botanist. San Diego – a coastal desert, after all – would not look as

lush and colorful as it does today were it not for her nurturing influence and laborious plantings.

This year marks the centennial of Mission Hills Nursery, which Sessions founded and operated for many years (although she had been in the nursery business in Coronado and Mission Hills since 1885). Mission Hills Garden Club is celebrating both Sessions and the nursery during its 12th annual garden walk on May 8.

"A Walk to Remember: Kate Sessions' Legacy in Bankers Hill" is a self-guided tour of a dozen gardens in one of the city's most beautiful historic neighborhoods. The tour begins at the nursery and may end there with a clinking of wine glasses, as each ticket holder is entitled to one free glass of wine and a discount on Sessions' favorite plants. A trolley will ferry guests who prefer not to drive from the nursery to nearby Bankers Hill, with Nancy Carol Carter, a Kate Sessions expert and president of the San Diego Floral Association, aboard to talk about the nurserywoman's life and accomplishments.

"I've always admired her independence and her will," Carter said. "There is no list, but she had to be one of the few women in the U.S. who ran her own nursery and she did this when water was unreliable in San Diego." Sessions is, however, on every short list of people who transformed horticulture in Southern California, Carter said.

Sessions, who majored in chemistry at the University of California at Berkeley, is most often credited with transforming barren mesas into Balboa Park, but she did so much more. She corresponded with botanists from Kew Gardens to South Africa to Harvard to exchange seeds and information. She wrote many articles for newspapers and the Floral Association's magazine, frequently endorsing her chosen plants with the exhortation "every garden should have one." And "how far ahead of her time she was in conserving water and preserving canyons," said Garden Walk co-chair Kathleen Stoughton.

Gardens on the tour reflect the many facets of Katherine Olivia Sessions, from importer of exotic plants to domesticator of California natives, such as Ceanothus, or wild lilac, and Matilija poppy.

Sessions is known to have created two of the gardens, which thrive alongside magnificent, early 20th-century houses designed by acclaimed architect Irving J. Gill and the brief but brilliant architectural partnership of Frank Mead and Richard Requa. A third garden on the tour may also be one of hers, according to a 1940s newspaper article and judging from its mature specimens of some of her preferred plants and palms. All three are quite different in personality and terrain.

The rest represent Sessions in spirit or in stone – low rock walls, to be exact, which Carter said she introduced to San Diego to create Arts & Crafts-era terraced gardens and pathways in canyons. Whether amid sprightly flower beds edged with succulents or beneath a rustic wood arbor Sessions may have built, you'll feel part of a quieter, more genteel time.

The Mission Hills Garden Walk reliably offers the sensory delights of handsome or picturesque architecture paired with charming and inspiring gardens. This year's tour adds yet another dimension by dipping into canyon gardens, which are usually hidden from the public.

One such "secret" garden has recently been brought back to a semblance of what Sessions called for by Randy Laurie of Laurie's Landscaping for homeowner Sandra Phelps. The steep slope behind Phelps' Gill-designed house was so tangled and allergenic that she ignored it most of the time. "The canyon was mysterious and overgrown," Phelps recalled. "I lived in the house and the canyon lived separately."

Still, the canyon appealed to her because she knew it had been designed as a communal garden for a cluster of houses by Gill that Katherine Teats commissioned for both sides of the canyon. Lloyd Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright's son, was working for Gill at the time and drew a plot plan that exists today. It shows curvaceous walks and retaining walls running along the terraced slopes, below the houses, without regard for lot lines. Sessions was hired to refine the plan and create individual gardens.

Phelps showed Laurie a circa 1933 photo of her house, built in 1912, and the then-mostly barren canyon. His curiosity led him to the San Diego Historical Society archives, where he learned more about Sessions, Gill, Teats and other key players of the day, such as George Marston and Alice Lee. "I realized there was so much happening then, approximately 100 years ago, and how much they did together for our city," Laurie said, citing Balboa Park's evolution and the founding of the Serra Museum at the Presidio.

At this point, Laurie was calling Phelps every other day with his discoveries. After he got her okay to start clearing out the canyon to see exactly what was underneath all that vegetation and decades of decayed leaves, he was beside himself. "He suddenly changed from a landscaper into an archeologist," Phelps said with pleasure. "He'd find a little evidence, then extrapolate and find more parts."

Laurie unearthed a network of rock walls, paths and stairways, components Wright suggested on his plot plan and Sessions made real. He repaired or rebuilt them all. Halfway down the slope, a concrete-and-rock bench for two, which had been upended, is again ready for birdwatchers, and several sets of stairs – some newly discovered – meander into the canyon.

Standing on one of the restored paths amid lots of greenery, Phelps looked up at her house, which seems to tower over the canyon. "This is the vision Irving Gill had of this land and this house when he married the two," she said. "They're meant to be integral parts of each other."

A few blocks away, at Stoughton's house, is the other documented Sessions garden on the tour, which was recreated from an original drawing. It's a large, formal kitchen garden ablaze in blue blossoms, which match historic accent tiles on this 1914 property. Fruit trees and a dozen kinds of herbs fill the geometric beds.

Stoughton has the signed receipt from Sessions for a black mission fig tree and believes the ancient fig in one corner and a Wonga-wonga vine, originally from Australia, may be the ones Sessions planted.

Many of Sessions' favorite plants and those that are drought-tolerant on the tour are highlighted in the attractive booklet Stoughton produced with the same attention to quality and detail she gave to fine art during her years as director of UCSD's Mandeville Art Gallery. Stoughton also sprinkled Sessions quotes throughout and left room for visitors to write notes in this brochure that gardeners and history buffs alike will want to keep.

This is indeed a garden walk to remember.

A Garden Walk to Remember: Kate Sessions' Legacy in Bankers Hill

May 8

10 a.m. to 4 p.m

Tickets: \$25 in advance, \$30 day-of, include an afternoon wine reception

Children 12 and under free.

Buy tickets at Mission Hills Nursery, 1525 Ft. Stockton Dr., or online at missionhillsgardenclub.org.

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