

# Gateway garden honors history

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In a place of spirit and natural grace, American Indian elders recently joined the staff of the UC Davis Arboretum and university to dedicate a project intended to heal and honor: the Native American Contemplative Garden.

"I'm really happy with the results," said Sheri Tatsch, a former member of the university's Native American Studies department who worked on the project. "After all these years, it was hard to believe it was actually happening."

Located just north of the Mondavi Center, the Native American garden also is the first in the arboretum's GATEways Project. Standing for "Gardens, Arts and the Environment," this 10-year master plan uses the Arboretum as a community portal to the campus.

But this garden also serves as a gateway for appreciating the past while looking to the future. The honoring project, believed to be the first of its kind at any public university in the nation, recognizes the land's original inhabitants, the Patwin, while educating the campus and its visitors about them.

In a heartfelt ceremony last weekend, about 130 people celebrated a Thanksgiving on a site used by the Patwin for more than 4,000 years.

"It was very quiet, very soft," Tatsch said. "There was a gentleness that was very pleasing."

Footsteps away was the cause of lingering pain. During the construction of the Mondavi Center in 1999, the remains of 13 Patwin were unearthed in what had been a village and sacred burial ground. Their remains dated between A.D. 700 and 1200.

During the 1800s, Patwin families were forcibly relocated from their Putah Creek home to missions. The names of several of these Patwin are commemorated on a central garden pillar.

"Everybody spoke from the heart," Tatsch said after the ceremony. "We didn't hide the fact that there was anger and sadness and that we didn't trust each other in the beginning. But now, we have formed a group of people with strong connections."

Added arboretum director Kathleen Socolofsky, "It was such an incredible event. This is much more than just a garden."

## **Past connects to present**

Beside the Putah Creek streambed grows a 400-year-old oak tree. It was a sapling when the Pilgrims celebrated their first Thanksgiving in 1621 with the Wampanoag in what's now Massachusetts.

"This tree witnessed extreme change, both physical and cultural," said Warren Roberts, the arboretum's recently retired superintendent, who helped pick out the plants. "What makes this site unique is that it was part of history, not someplace else where history is being commemorated. It happened right here. This garden connects the history of our land with our current students and future generations."

Appropriately for a garden, it's a living history.

Said Tatsch: "That's a big accomplishment for the university to acknowledge that history. There's a Patwin community alive and well and living around us. At the same time, we honor those who are gone and the

land that is their homeland."

Other honoring sites will dot the Davis campus, which sits on Patwin land. Each site features engraved basalt columns with words in both English and native Patwin. Made of volcanic stone, these 1,500-pound columns represent the Patwin people, their strength, their resilience. They also evoke connections.

"Listen to the natural world," reads one message, written by tribal elder Bill Wright. "This is a gift from the Creator. Pray so your spirit will be healthy and joyful."

A basalt column at the garden entrance starts visitors on a path of discovery: "Try to imagine this place with no building, no sidewalks, no roads ..."

Featuring 35 native plants used by local indigenous people, the garden serves as a lesson in American Indian studies and botany as well as history. Valley oaks provided acorns, a major food source. Alumroot, soaproot, yarrow, sedges, deergrass, Oregon grape, redbud; each had multiple uses. Their Patwin names – some that had not been spoken in years – are listed along with English and botanical titles.

"There were so many uses for some of these plants," said arboretum horticulturist Ryan Deering, who coordinated the planting. "Take soaproot. It was used for food, soap, glue, brushes, medicine – so much stuff from one plant."

"We've already been approached by (Patwin) community members who would like to use these redbuds for basket-making," Deering adds. "That's a wonderful idea."

American Indian students helped in the planting. The garden's gently curving paths resemble the coils of a basket.

### **Inspiration to others**

"It feels very organic," said Skip Mezger, the university's landscape architect. "We've already gotten calls from other universities that would like to do something like this. Hopefully, the garden will inspire others."

In recent weeks, river otters have made this site their home, too – a good sign.

"There is an essence to it," Tatsch said. "It has now become a sacred space. There is a definite difference, walking down that path."

"One of the beauties of this (project) is that garden won't be going away," she said. "Future generations may not have any idea how this came about, but they'll see those stones welcome them into the garden where they can get an idea of the history of this place."

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