

History of the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum

Special thanks to Nicole Lyons, Wendy Robinson, and Tiffany Faulstich for their support throughout the duration of this project.

Additional and sincere thanks to David Hannings, Virginia Walter, Chris Wassenberg, Mike Zohns, and Tom Eltzroth, who each took the time to share their memories of the Leaning Pine Arboretum. The work that you have done continues to educate and inspire!

Lastly, thank you to all stewards of the Leaning Pine Arboretum, whose dedication has created and will continue to nurture this beautiful space, cherished by everyone who has had the joy of strolling through its grounds.

HISTORY OF THE *LEANING PINE* ARBORETUM

BY HOKU CHIDESTER



1. Stunning view of Bishop's Peak from the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum

THE BEGINNINGS

From its very beginnings, the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum has been characterized by the creativity, resourcefulness, and collaboration of its stewards. As a living, growing composite of botanical treasures, the Arboretum has provided Cal Poly with over fifty years of educational opportunities for hands-on learning. It is a cherished resource to both students and visitors, and, like any other living thing, it has uniquely adapted over time into something even more beautiful, efficient, and valuable to the horticulture of the Central Coast.

The idea of establishing the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum first planted seed under the faculty of the Plant Sciences Department, formerly the Ornamental Horticulture Department, in 1971. Prior to the 1970s, the facilities for horticulture programs were built along Grand Avenue. For many years, the land where today's greenhouses and the Arboretum stand was empty, grazing land. On quiet afternoons, you may still find grazing deer on the hills behind you while meandering through the Arboretum, a reminder of the impressive and long-term work that turned those hills into the beautiful gardens of today.

As facilities were moved and the area off of Via Carta became more developed, the department acquired a miscellaneous collection of plants that had nowhere to go. This prompted lecturers to ideate a collection of woody plants in the open fields beneath the northern foothills of campus to provide students with plant and landscape material that they may engage with and learn from directly— an outdoor laboratory for students to get real experience. By 1973, several former horticulture professors, including Wes Connor, Tony Amato, Ron Regan, Tom Eltzroth, Woody Frey, and Tim Gaskin, had begun laying the groundwork for the Arboretum and planted the first miscellaneous trees, acquired from various nursery donations or even unused plants from across the university campus.



2. Mediterranean Collection original signage

Over time, under the direction of Professor Eltzroth, the resourceful acquisition of plant specimens focused into distinct regional gardens representing the five mediterranean climates of the world: Australia, California, Chile, the Mediterranean basin, and South Africa. In addition, there are several smaller specialized gardens that emphasize the dynamic creativity of the Arboretum's

stewards, including the Entry Garden, the Formal Garden, the New Zealand garden, the Dwarf and Unusual Conifer garden, the Primitive garden, and the Palm and Aloe garden.

THE *LEANING PINE*

In the mid-70s, student-turned-professor Mike Zohns worked with Professor Amato to begin planting as many trees as possible in the empty fields behind the new horticulture unit. As Cal Poly commenced construction on buildings closer to the center of campus, trees were removed from their original placement to make room. Amato and his students, with the assistance of Zohns, loaded two 20-foot mature pine trees from the engineering buildings into a skip loader and transplanted them right up the hill to the Arboretum. Over time, winds blew these trees over until they no longer stood up straight. These distinctive leaning pines became a

defining landmark for the developing arboretum, and eventually the name stuck. Though the leaning pines eventually aged out and had to be removed, the name remains as a reminder of the Arboretum's playful and organic beginnings. From the first plants that gave it its distinct character, the Arboretum has been the product of a legacy of embracing collaboration, creativity, resourcefulness, and mindful stewardship.

By taking on this feat of relocating two huge pine trees, Professor Zohns embodied the enthusiastic and resourceful attitude that the Arboretum inspires. During his professorship at Cal Poly, he could always be counted on to quickly get involved and get things done, whether it be removing an old tree, installing something new, or shifting something heavy. His willingness to take on new challenges and his prowess with heavy machinery was instrumental in the development of the Arboretum, and his classes got hands-on and up close with unprecedented tasks all the time. As he looked back on his time in the Arboretum, the learn by doing opportunities stood out to him the most. When asked about the purpose of the Arboretum, he replied in his remarkably sunny manner, "We take students out of the classroom, come up here, and go to work!" Professor Zohns is

passionate about the learning opportunities that lie in waiting all around us. His advice to the curious-minded? "You raise your hand as many times as you can. Take advantage of the opportunities that happen here." To Professor Zohns, the Arboretum continues to represent limitless potential for experience and new discoveries for those who give themselves the opportunity.



3. Professor Zohns teaching Arboriculture in a Modesto Ash tree

THE FIVE MEDITERRANEAN CLIMATES

Through the 80s, the Arboretum developed slowly as landscape architecture, ornamental horticulture, and plant identification classes used the space as an outdoor laboratory. New plants were brought in and placed according to their ideal conditions in the Arboretum, and senior projects in horticulture aided in the development of the five acres, yet there persisted to be a lack

of structure and organization. In 1989, Professor Tom Eltzroth, feeling an impulse towards botanical creativity, approached the department with the plan that he would officially take up the management of the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum under three conditions: first, that he would have complete charge of the Arboretum. Secondly, that he would be responsible for raising all of the funds for developing it. His third condition was an upfront, initial investment of \$500 from the department to get development going right away. Under these conditions, Professor Eltzroth became the first official director of the Arboretum with a clear direction for its future: it would be the Central Coast's Premier Horticulture Display Garden, featuring the five mediterranean climates of the world.

This summer, Professor Eltzroth sat down and recounted, with nostalgic irony, his earliest memories of the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum after he took over the directorship. "The first thing we did was remove virtually every plant in here that didn't fit that mold. There were junipers here from China, there were maple trees from Europe... So we did a lot of cutting down of trees,



4. Palm tree in the Mediterranean Garden

which, on the surface, sounds like a horrible way to start an Arboretum!" With the focus of the five mediterranean regions established, plant specimen collection and placement became more intentional under his care. Some trees that were already established did remain in the Arboretum, and in fact helped to guide the growth and development as the stewards brought gardens to life. The towering palm tree that pinpoints the Mediterranean Garden has been in the Arboretum for decades. "I always figured a bird

had planted the seed, I don't know how it got there. But that's what dictated to me this is going to be the Mediterranean Garden, because that's where that palm tree was from." Olive trees and cork oaks are just some of what now fill out the lush garden around the palm tree that still stands today. The key principle of collaboration in the Arboretum in this case extends beyond the teamwork between stewards to a partnership between the very roots of the Arboretum, its inhabitants, and the hands that tend to it. By embracing the existing landscape, creativity and resourcefulness have brought the vision of the five mediterranean climates and more to fruition.

Friendly competition motivated the rapid development of the Arboretum, between faculty and students alike. Professor Eltzroth's earliest student employees were each assigned a garden to care and maintain in order to instill a sense of ownership, responsibility, and pride in their work. The stewards found themselves in friendly competition with one another, each of their pristinely maintained gardens impelling the others to keep them clear of weeds and looking their best. Some stewards went above and beyond to make their garden the most beautiful in creative ways, like by making designs in the pathways to entice visitors.



5. Neat pathway in South African Garden

Professor Eltzroth also engaged in the competition. Cal Poly alum and former lecturer, David Fross, lent his specialization in California Native plants to the development of the California Garden. As he taught a class focused on California Natives, he recognized a need for a space in which students could engage with these plants. Working alongside his former teacher, Fross generously focused on developing the California Garden while Professor Eltzroth took charge of the remainder of the Arboretum. From 1989 to 2000, in a friendly race to the borders of the Arboretum, Professor Eltzroth and Fross led meticulous stewards in the development of all five acres.

Throughout the years, with the generosity of individuals like David Fross, the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum has been graciously supported by nurseries and horticulturalists for the



6. Neat garden bed, ca. 2000

acquisition of plant materials, as well as occasional tools and equipment essential to landscape development. From its inception, the Arboretum has been self-funded, as per Professor Eltzroth's three conditions. Donors and patrons of the Arboretum invest in the education of students, the compensation of committed and hardworking employees, and the

collective natural resources of the Central Coast. Those who have contributed to the building of

the Arboretum in any capacity have witnessed the long-term achievements as a result of their support.

STUDENT STEWARDSHIP

Professor Eltzroth employed his first student to assist him in the Arboretum in 1989. While the Arboretum formerly depended entirely on volunteer work, this set the enduring precedent for students to be hired at the Arboretum as paid employees, yet another educational



7. Arboretum crew clearing pathways

opportunity, and allowing students to gain professional and hands-on work experience while being fairly compensated. Over the years, the Arboretum has been stewarded by crews of committed and hardworking students who bring their own creativity and skill to its detail-oriented stewardship. The Arboretum is proud to consistently employ strong teams of hardworking

students, which is made possible by the generous donorship of the Arboretum's patrons, as well as its own revenue generated from hosting events.

During the early years of the Arboretum, the first student stewards were each appointed to care for a particular garden, which cultivated a sense of accountability, pride, and ownership over their work. Friendly competition between the stewards of each garden motivated the students to keep their section beautifully maintained and neat, both for the enjoyment of visitors and for the feeling of accomplishment that they discovered through landscape management. As they oversaw their own garden, they worked as part of a larger team to learn how to build and maintain a beautiful space for visitors to enjoy. Today, student stewards work together to take on new challenges and projects, and use teamwork to upkeep the grounds. Through the development of



8. Sign creation as a senior project

relationships with visitors and benefactors, and the relationships between the stewards and the gardens that they work with, the Arboretum has been self-sustained since its outset.

From 1989 through the 2000s, as students came through the horticulture programs, senior projects and classes took on development plans in the Arboretum to explore and gain new skills and to enhance visitor experience, including building structures such as a gazebo, a viewing deck, a pond, and art installations. From the late 80s through the 2000s, the Arboretum experienced its golden years as it rapidly developed, and the LPA became one of the most recognized and expansive botanical collections on the West Coast. As gardens and lawns became more established, it began hosting events including graduation ceremonies and, for several seasons, performances of Shakespeare plays from local theater groups. The horticultural variety and the diligent stewardship of the grounds truly established it as the premier horticulture garden on the central coast.



9. Sign installation

The involvement of the community influenced the development of the Arboretum. These



10. Visitors on the lawn, split by the creek

Shakespeare plays were performed on the former gazebo, on the central lawn. Until the 90s, a creek split the lawn in two, forcing viewers to trek across the water to reach the other side of the lawn and limiting the ability of the Arboretum to appropriately host events as it became more inviting and hospitable. Under the guidance of faculty, students learned how to move the creek underground with two large pipes, and then fill in the lawn with new turf to create a seamless, cohesive stretch of grass that makes the space more usable and accessible.

By recognizing the needs of its visitors, the Arboretum's stewards have responded to create an adaptable space that is equitably accessible and useful to the community. Graduation ceremonies

and local events have since taken place on the beautiful lawn and created lasting memories for visitors.

In 2008, Professor Eltzroth retired from the Director position of the *LPA*, and management shifted to his former student Cal Poly, Chris Wassenberg, who worked in the Arboretum from 1999-2003, first as a volunteer. Wassenberg's time in the Arboretum stretched across two decades, and he witnessed the ground-up changes that took place over the years. From laying down the turf on the lawn to harvesting rocks in the hillsides behind the Arboretum to build pathways and hardscaping, Wassenberg was involved in formative projects and meticulous maintenance of the gardens. As he recalled his own experience as a student, he fondly thought back to bringing tractors and picks up to the hillsides above the Arboretum to harvest these rocks, and bringing them into the cohesive landscaping of paths and stairs. "I've always thought that was something that really made the garden special because it ties everything together," Wassenberg shared as he and Professor Eltzroth strolled together side-by-side through the Arboretum for the first time in over a decade. "So even though you're visiting these different parts of the world, there's certain attributes that are kept throughout.



11. Students moving the creek underground



12. Harvesting rock from the hills behind the LPA



13. Hardscaping with local rocks

The rock stays the same, pathways stay the same." The story of the Arboretum and its surrounding areas is written into these pathways, captured in stone, and as the two former directors walked together through the five acres, they read between the lines of what still remains today to bring back their fond memories of building it together.



14. Chris Wassenberg operating machinery distinctive today.

Wassenberg's senior project is still nestled between benches in the Mediterranean Garden, a small pond that continues to hold water and enhance the beauty of the garden for visitors. He belonged to a highly committed and productive crew of Arboretum stewards who worked closely, side-by-side, with Professor Eltzroth to undertake large-scale development of the Arboretum in the late 90s and early 2000s. Other senior projects that remain include the Dwarf and Unusual Conifer Garden, the Palm and Aloe Garden, the viewing deck at the entrance of the Arboretum, and the unique bottle trees that stand out in the Australian Garden. The individualized contributions of students who took advantage of learning opportunities in the Arboretum continue to make the gardens more enjoyable and

In 2015, the Arboretum almost faced deconstruction and relocation for the expansion of other, highly-funded, campus facilities, which would have compromised all of the work that had been put into the hardscaping of the LPA and pose a threat to the long-term health of many of the plants that had already been established for over forty years. Former professor Virginia Walter took the lead, and with support from alumni and community members, as well as the local newspaper *The Tribune*, advocates for the Arboretum rallied together and saved it from demolition. An event hosted on the lawn brought people together to sign petitions and express their concerns to the university. Clearly, the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum holds great value to the San Luis Obispo community for its educational opportunities and oasis that it provides to visitors. This was truly a beautiful moment that demonstrated the value that the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum has for the community at large, and it secured the future education of students who come through the horticulture programs and were educated in the living classroom the opportunity to *learn by doing*.

The primary purpose of the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum, first and foremost, is to educate. Students learn about horticulture, landscape development and management, plant identification

and care, and countless unique individual skills that are taught with each new project. Visitors come and learn about the horticulture of mediterranean climates, as well as other specialized plant collections. All visitors may learn about the kinds of plants they can maintain in their own garden, and the legacy of this educational benefit can be seen all over Cal Poly's campus and the San Luis Obispo area even today.

Plants that were introduced and popularized by the Arboretum include the many varieties of the california ceanothus, whose bright purple hues color the homes and landscaping around the local areas. The colorful and unique proteas that are displayed in the South African Garden also dot many lawns in town with their sprays of yellow and orange and interesting texture. The dwarf bottlebrush, with its small leaves and fiery red flowers, are also easily recognized in local landscaping. The popular use of these plants in the mediterranean climate of San Luis Obispo is a testament to the success of the Arboretum's educational mission, as its displays have introduced home gardeners and local landscapers to new plant varieties that they encountered in these five acres. It is no surprise that visitors of the Arboretum have left with inspiration that they bring back to their own gardening, and indeed it appears to be a natural progression to Professor Eltzroth when he considers the Arboretum's long-term impact on the community: "When you're dealing with plants, you're connecting with nature and that really has some deep rooted meaning to us as humans." The connection between people and nature is the core of the Arboretum, where all other distractions may fade away amid the canopy of the Italian stone pines, in the sweet aroma of the *Psoralea pinnata*, and the undisturbed view of Bishop's Peak and the surrounding topography.



15. *Psoralea pinnata*

THE ARBORETUM TODAY

Today, under the leadership of Manager Tiffany Faulstich, the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum has a bright future to look forward to. In 2022, the LPA received a one million dollar donation to further develop the five acres of lush garden and future expansion outward, and to build facilities

to improve visitor experience. This continuation of the Arboretum's educational purpose and expansion will pave the way for innovative sustainable land management to prepare Cal Poly students for the future of the horticulture industry. Since 2023, Faulstich has looked forward to bringing the Arboretum back to its full glory through meticulous care and expansion and to continue providing a beautiful oasis for the community, and hands-on educational and professional experience to students.

As she prepares to take on an expansion that would add two and a half acres to the Arboretum, Faulstich is embracing the potentiality of students and what they will contribute to the landscaping and horticulture industry. "When I started teaching, the first thing I noticed was that these students are going to be the change makers, they want to save the world. They want to be environmentally and socially responsible, and hopefully fiscally responsible as well." The



16. Managers of the LPA

expansion project is a perfect opportunity to explore new technologies and strategies to help students achieve their goals, and to gain real experience that will prepare them for their professional careers. Faulstich hopes to impart onto visitors the value of plants in their lives, and to show them that plants are an asset to the world around them and to communities.

For decades, the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum has been an invaluable educational resource to Cal Poly and its students, as well as the San Luis Obispo community. At the heart of its exigency is the purpose to educate. Students learn alongside expert faculty to build a beautiful outdoor gallery of arboriculture, which in turn are cared for and displayed for visitors to learn about these plants and to inspire them to engage with the natural world around them. It continues to bring back former students and long-term patrons, as well as new visitors as they discover the hidden gem of Cal Poly's campus. The *Leaning Pine* Arboretum is an enduring safe-haven for all learners, lifelong students, and appreciators of hard work, creativity, and all the beauty that nature offers.

PHOTOGRAPH CITATIONS

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2. Photo of Mediterranean Collection Original Signage, ca. 1998. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
3. OH Instructor Mike Zohns and OH Senior Perform Arboriculture on a Modesto Ash in Front of the Old Clock Tower. UA0024 Horticulture and Crop Science, Box 6. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
4. Palm Tree in Mediterranean Garden. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 3 Miscellaneous Photographs at Leaning Pine Arboretum. Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
5. Neat pathway in the South African Garden, ca. 2000. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
6. Neat garden bed in the South African Garden, ca. 2000. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
7. Students Working on Pathway, ca. 1999-2004. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
8. Sign Creation for LPA (Kirk A. Howe's Senior Project). UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
9. Student Installing Signs. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
10. Lawn Split by Creek Before Landscaping, ca. Summer 1999. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

11. Moving Creek Underground Through Pipes, Sod Laying. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
12. Harvesting Rock from the Hills Behind the Horticulture Unit. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
13. Hardscaping with Mike Zohns. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
14. Chris Wassenberg operating machinery. UA0032 Leaning Pine Arboretum Inventory, Box 2 Photographs and Negatives. Special Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo, CA.
15. Chidester, Hoku. *Psoralea pinnata*, Grape Kool-Aid Plant. 2024. Author's personal collection.
16. Chidester, Hoku. Managers of the *Leaning Pine* Arboretum Tom Eltzroth, Chris Wassenberg, and Tiffany Faulstich. 2024. Author's personal collection.