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Contents

The Mysterious Smoke Trees of Palm Springs
Steven Keylon ..........................................................................................................................................

From a Renaissance Villa: The Italian Landscape Style in America
Nancy Carol Carter ...............................................................................................................................

Members in the News: CGLHS at Modernism Week
Steven Keylon .....................................................................................................................................

Successive owners have preserved Sarah Ferrell’s expressions of spirituality in the Georgia garden she began in 1841. Tichenor Brothers Collection, 1930s Postcard courtesy the Boston Public Library.
Artist Paul Grimm (American, 1891-1974) was inspired by the smoke trees of Palm Springs, painting them for decades. This painting is titled “Smoke Trees ‘Neath San Jacinto.” Courtesy Heritage Auctions.
The resort village of Palm Springs is known around the world for its golf courses, museums, entertainment, and shopping. However, one of the great pleasures of being there is the ability to get away from all visible signs of civilization very quickly, and to hike into desert landscapes with dramatic rock formations, often populated with Bighorn sheep. Deep in the canyons, one can find cool, shady riparian oases, filled with native trees. Palms (*Washingtonia filifera*), sycamores (*Platanus racemosa*), willows (*Chilopsis linearis ssp. arcuata*), and cottonwoods (*Populus fremontii ssp. fremontii*) line the creeks, the banks covered in trailing wild grapevines (*Vitis girdiana*).  

There is another native tree that has captured the attention of artists for over a century. The smoke tree (*Psorothamnus spinosus*; syn. *Dalea spinosa*) at first glance looks like its name—graceful groves of soft, hazy blue-gray clouds cascade down the dry, sandy washes like puffs of smoke on the horizon. In 1938, landscape architect Ralph D. Cornell, who was fascinated by the flora of the desert, wrote a book titled *Conspicuous California Plants*. In it, he describes the smoke tree as “a softly outlined form of mythical substance silhouetted against the deeper blue of a cloudless sky.” Upon closer inspection of the mysterious tree, he finds:

> Its leafless branches divide into countless thousands of branchlets, which in turn may be reduced to slender spines in such profusion that what actually is rather a harsh and thorny plant presents the appearance of being soft and ephemeral in its illusory intricacy of structure.

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—Ralph D. Cornell, *Conspicuous California Plants*, 1938

The nudist cult, which so many of the desert plants appear to have joined in their battle to limit transpiration of moisture content to its irreducible minimum, presents one of its most striking and beautiful members in the form of the desert smoke tree. Such leaves as appear on the plant are simple and few and persist on young shoots for a very few weeks at most, seeming to be more of a jaunty gesture than any serious attempt to convince the world that foliage is necessary either to the health or beauty of well-ordered plant life on the desert.”

—Ralph D. Cornell, *Conspicuous California Plants*, 1938
night-softened forms of rugged landscape, is a mystic sight that stirs childhood memories of ghost tales and goblins.\(^3\)

For much of the year, the tree remains cloaked in nondescript gray spiny branches. In the early summer, however, it suddenly erupts into a dazzling display of deep and fragrant indigo flowers. As Cornell described it, To know the smoke tree is an experience; but one cannot know it at its strikingly best unless he has seen it in full flush of flower in June or early July, after the first blast of summer heat has driven visiting dilettanti back to the refrigerated comforts of coastal civilization. Then, the tiny, pea-shaped flowers, that have been described as pure ultramarine and as deep as violet-purple, appear in such profusion and in such unbelievable intensity of color that they actually obliterate all vision of the plant structure with a saturating deluge of brilliant pigment that can be seen from afar. Closer inspection also discloses a delicate perfume that further adds to the illusory charm of so unusual a plant.\(^4\)

It is surprising to learn that the smoke tree is a member of the pea family (\textit{Fabaceae}). Even more astonishing is the fact that so are most of the other trees native to the Coachella Valley. Don Admiral, the founder of the Palm Springs Desert Museum in 1938, was an admired naturalist, educator, native desert plant champion, and author of the book \textit{Desert of the Palms} (1938). In a 1935 news article, he explained:

\begin{quote}
The trees of our desert are few in number but of a hardy strain, able to withstand the demands of life in a land where the unfit succumb quickly. There are seven kinds that might be classified as native, six of these dwell in the sandy washes and waste places, the other requires a constant supply of water, hence is confined to the canyons and water holes. Of these seven, five—ironwood, Palo Verde, honey mesquite, screwbean, mesquite, smoke tree—belong to the pea family. It is remarkable that a single family, extensive as it is, should furnish such a large percent of the hardy desert trees.\(^5\)
\end{quote}

The first inhabitants of the Coachella Valley, the Agua Caliente Band of the Cahuilla Indians, were known to have utilized the diverse flora of the desert. Dr. Katherine Siva Saubel and Lowell Bean, who together studied the Cahuilla’s uses and experimentations of more than 250 native desert plant species for culinary, medicinal, and technological benefits, found that the smoke tree was not among them.\(^6\) The first non-native to discover the smoke tree was legendary Captain

\below: Title: Desert Glow. An atmospheric day with dark clouds and dramatic light reveal the detailed beauty and varied color of the smoke trees in Araby Wash in Palm Springs.

\opposite: The smoke tree creates stark contrast and blends well with other desert flora, creating a beautiful palette of color. Photographed in Smoke Tree Ranch.
John C. Fremont, who undertook one of his plant-gathering expeditions of the west in 1844. One of the specimens he acquired on that trip was a smoke tree, bringing back a small, incomplete sample. In 1852 Dr. George Thurbur, of the United States and Mexican Boundary Commission, was able to secure an excellent specimen. Thurbur gave the example to Asa Gray, professor of botany at Harvard, who gave it the name Dalea spinosa. The genus Dalea has several species in the Coachella Valley, but the smoke tree is the largest. Named after the English botanist, Samuel Dale (1659-1739), it includes about 150 species, most of which are Mexican, but also found in South America.9

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INTERVIEW WITH LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHER MILLICENT HARVEY

The Smoketree School lives on through the lens of photographer Millicent Harvey. A photographer for 40 years, Harvey, a Boston native, has lived in Palm Springs since 2010 and has been photographing smoke trees for the last eight. During Modernism Week in February, Harvey had a show of her work at Stephen Baumbach Gallery in Palm Springs. The editor of Eden recently interviewed Harvey about her captivating smoke tree photography.

EDEN: How did you get started in fine art photography?

MILLICENT HARVEY: In the early 2000s, I decided I wanted to go back to school at night and get my bachelor’s degree while still working during the day. My thesis project was using photography as an expressive art therapy, and throughout the process, photographing landscape became central to my thesis. It rekindled my love for the fine art side of photography. It also solidified the idea that photography is about a connection between the subject and the photographer.

E: I know your work as a landscape and architecture photographer; how did you decide to focus on that?

MH: I was a portrait photographer for many years, and I loved taking portraits. I learned a great deal about working with clients, subjects, working with artificial lighting, and coming up with creative solutions in a short amount of time. One of the companies I was taking staff portraits for was a landscape architecture firm. At the same time, I was getting my bachelor’s degree, and my landscape architecture client asked to see my new...
photography from my thesis project. I showed him some of my latest work, and intrigued, he asked me to photograph one of their projects, which turned into twenty-five more projects. Ultimately, the work I produced for them became an extended photographic essay for a monograph they produced.

Today, I photograph for landscape architects, publications, and landscape related clients, and work on my own personal projects. I love photographing natural landscapes and designed landscapes because I love what I am looking at and how it feels to be in the landscape. I am driven by photographic elements that I am drawn to and inspired by—light, shadow, atmosphere to convey a feeling, and the interplay with design elements that I see naturally—form, texture, pattern, shape, and lines.

E: You've lived in Palm Springs for about ten years now, what do you like about it?

MH: There are many things I love about Palm Springs, and as a photographer, I find the desert landscape magical with its vibrant and pastel palette of colors and rich textures. Combined with the many weather elements all happening at once magic happens—it is inspiring to me as a photographer. I enjoy that Palm Springs has so much going on culturally and in five minutes you can be hiking in a glorious canyon.

E: Tell me about your relationship to smoke trees—when did you discover them? What draws you to them? What are you trying to capture when you photograph them?

MH: When I moved to Palm Springs, I was fascinated by the diverse desert trees and plants, which were all new to me. Here I discovered a

Has living in the desert influenced your photography?

MH: Yes, living in the desert has influenced my photography. The unique light, shadow, and atmosphere that are characteristic of the desert provide endless opportunities for artistic expression. I love capturing the essence of the desert landscape through my photographs, and I believe that my work reflects the beauty and diversity of this remarkable environment.
land where sun, sand, wind, drought, and flood gave tenuous hold to only the hardiest plants. I found it so peaceful to be out in the desert by myself. I walked the washes and mountain trails amazed at their adaptations to survive this harsh climate. Over time my initial trepidation turned to awe—a reverence for the austerity of desert life and a transformation in my aesthetic sensibilities.

Then, a friend pointed out the smoke tree. Intrigued, I began exploring Palm Springs, looking for more information. I went to the Palm Springs Historical Society and the Palm Springs Art Museum, where I observed that the smoke tree was a constant subject for the plein-air painters from the early 1900s till today. The smoke trees were depicted so beautifully in the paintings that I became curious about photographing them.

Smoke trees thrive in the desert washes, so I followed my curiosity and went searching for them. When I first spotted smoke trees from a distance, I was intrigued by what I saw—thay wispy tangle of thin, gray branches looked like puffs of smoke. Fascinated, I walked the washes in search of their scarce, small groves. One late afternoon I ventured into the Araby Wash in Palm Springs, and I was stunned and intrigued with what I saw—the luminosity, color variation, and grace of the smoke tree. As I spent more time with these curious beings, I fell in love as they revealed their grace: light, lyrical, dancers in the wind. Whilst I have photographed smoke trees in various places, Araby Wash became my favorite place, this most beautiful grove of smoke trees—it became my home away from home.

Once I had experienced the compelling contrast these trees present—how different they seem from afar vs. up close—I dedicated my photographer’s craft to bring the barely visible—these puffs of smoke—into photographs to share with others their ephemeral beauty. My photography, both technically and spiritually, became more attentive to the subtle, muted, tonal dimensions of my adopted home. My photography of the smoke trees became symbolic of this personal transformation.

You speak about the smoke trees in Araby Wash in the past tense. I know that you photographed the smoke trees in Araby Wash,
exploring them in every light, and all seasons. You have said they became a family to you. Tell me about the “Valentine’s Day Massacre,” the flooding in the Coachella Valley in February 2019, and what it did to the groves of trees. Will they recover? How long might that take?

MH: The desert washes where these families of smoke trees reside are drainage ways where water flows after an intense rain or flash flood. Because the smoke trees have a long taproot, they can survive a heavy rain, but on Valentine’s Day 2019, Palm Springs saw its wettest day in seventy-six years. The desert washes were overwhelmed by fast-flowing water, and the smoke trees in Araby Wash and other washes were swept away. The day after the flooding, I went away for two weeks. When I returned, I went to Araby Wash to photograph my trees and was shocked to see the smoke trees gone. My home away from home had been destroyed. Today, the recovery of the smoke trees in Araby Wash is stalled because the city is working to remove the sediment and debris left behind after the Valentine’s Day flooding. Once they are finished, I am not sure if the smoke trees will return, and if they do, it will take a long time for the trees to grow. On the other hand, I am grateful to have found and photographed these smoke trees, and now I have a collection of historical images.

End Notes

1 Conspicuous California Plants, Ralph D. Cornell, San Pasqual Press, Pasadena, 1938, 152.
3 Conspicuous California Plants, Ralph D. Cornell, San Pasqual Press, Pasadena, 1938, 152.
8 The Silva of North America: A Description of the Trees which Grow Naturally in North America Outside of Mexico, Charles Sprague Sargent, Houghton, Mifflin, 1892, 36.
9 “Museum Notes,” T. D. A. Cockerell, Desert Sun, May 12, 1944, 3. Though it is generally said that Fremont “discovered” the smoke tree, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians had inhabited the area for centuries. I couldn’t establish that the tribe used any part of the smoke tree, and David Prescott Barrows’ book The Ethno-botany of the Cahuilla Indians of Southern California (1900) makes no mention of it.
12 Interview with Millicent Harvey, Palm Springs, April 19, and May 6, 2020.

Above: Title: Brush Falls. Black and white photograph of an elder smoke tree aging gracefully. Photographed in Araby Wash.
Opposite: Title, Araby Wash. A view of the smoke trees in Araby Wash, photographed in 2013. Millicent’s first series of smoke tree images were in black and white.
From a Renaissance Villa: The Italian Landscape Style in America

NANCY CAROL CARTER

When a 1971 Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium examined the influence and presence of the Italian style in American landscapes, a preface to the conference papers asserted that “the history of western gardening from the Renaissance to the present is the history of either permutations of the Italian garden or reactions to it.”

Subsequent scholarship on America’s designed landscape has not quibbled meaningfully with this sweeping statement. Twenty years after the Dumbarton colloquium, a wave of scholarship examined Italian influences. Historian Richard G. Kenworthy set the scene by creating a state-by-state list identifying published documentation on every Italian garden in the United States. Kenworthy included gardens “either directly described as in the Italian taste or ... clearly identified with Italy.” He excluded gardens that may have displayed Italian features but were perceived by their owners or creators as belonging to another tradition. Also omitted were gardens described by the “nebulous term, Mediterranean.” He concludes that the Italianate garden flourished in the United States from 1840 to 1940, ten years longer than the period generally marked by other scholars.

A 1992 book on art and gardens in the United States whimsically offers an early date for American susceptibility to Italian influence: “Like a magic potion, Italianità has seeped through the stream of American aesthetic consciousness ever since Benjamin West stepped onto Italian soil in 1760.” Deborah Warren Davidson agreed with the notion of a diffused Italian sway and argued in 1994 that insufficient attention had been paid to the Italian garden as an influence in the United States. The Italian garden has “exercised uncommon fascination upon Americans,” and is consequently one of the most significant influences on the designed landscape. The principles of the Italian garden were adapted and transformed into principles of the American formal garden, Davidson wrote. Even when the garden is not “recognizably Italian.”

In 1993 the first English-language book on Italian gardens was reissued. The new edition of Charles A. Platt’s Italian Gardens (originally published in 1894) included an introductory essay by Keith N. Morgan, an architectural historian. Morgan also authored a 1994 symposium paper, “The Rise and Fall of the Italian Garden in America.” He produced the catalog for a 1995 exhibit on Charles A. Platt seventy years after his seminal Italian Gardens book was published. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Morgan concludes, “no foreign culture exerted a stronger influence on the American garden than that of Italy.”

While there is wide acceptance of the reality and strength of an Italian influence in Americans
gardens and landscapes, there is less agreement and understanding about the ways in which this influence reveals itself. What is an Italian garden? What is the “Italian style”? This two-part Eden series looks to a wide array of sources, gardens, landscapes and practitioners to understand the origins of the Italian style and its American manifestations.

Part 1 describes the Italian Renaissance villa and its early influence in England. The Italian style arrived in the United States via England, but also found a direct conduit in the deep affinity between Americans and Italy. The earliest Italian gardens in the United States are described. Later nineteenth-century interpretations of the Italian style are seen to veer toward caricature until scholarship and the work of landscape architects combined to mature the Italian style in America.

Part 2 (scheduled to appear in the next issue of Eden) includes a research bibliography and focuses on the Italian style in California, a state romanticized from an early date as “American Italy.” Californian terrains and plants present opportunities for pure forms of the Italian style. Yet, it is a fusion of Italian and Spanish-Moorish influences that eventually produce the celebrated “Mediterranean style” of architecture and gardens in California.

### PART 1: ORIGINS AND ADAPTATION OF THE ITALIAN STYLE

#### THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE VILLA

In imitation of the open-air academies of ancient Athens, the earliest Italian renaissance gardens were created as places of study and learned discussion. These “philosopher’s gardens” were typified by the Villa Medici in Rome, built in the 1450s, its Belvedere Courtyard with its series of “water tricks” on unsuspecting visitors.12 Three scores of water features across the expansive gardens. Copying of specific design elements was facilitated by the popularity of Villa d’Este paintings and prints. Villa d’Este outside Rome also inspired imitations. Constructed over a 30-year period, beginning in the 1560s, its gardens received more attention than buildings on the property. A natural watercourse is imaginatively harnessed for man-made enjoyment, illustrating the Renaissance aim of artfully taming nature.

The important legacy of the Italian villa is the treatment of the house and garden as a whole composition, “a unified outdoor place that has been the model for the future gardens of the western world.”13 By amalgamating a menu of repeated design principles and decorative features, Renaissance villas fashioned a recognizable “Italian style.”

#### THE ITALIAN STYLE IN ENGLAND

English visitors to Italy were entranced by the Renaissance villa from the earliest date. Their opinions were captured in seventeenth and eighteenth-century travel journals, guidebooks, and other writings examined by John Dixon Hunt for Garden and Grove. The Italian Renaissance Garden in the English Imagination, 1600–1750. This 1986 book used original documents to describe how the Italian Renaissance garden was perceived and understood. The English were charmed by the concept of garden and grove and attracted to the aesthetic principles of decorum and contrast in Italian architecture. Observers saw a pleasing proportion and order. They debated the ratio of art to nature in the Italian villa and particularly noticed the Renaissance villa’s celebration of variety, a design principle valued by the English and one that English visitors saw disappearing in French gardens.

The second part of Hunt’s book looks at the adoption of Italian forms in England and controversially asks, “how English was the English landscape garden?” Hunt’s research and analysis find a continuing emulation of Italian Renaissance models right through the “so-called English landscape garden” which he contends was not the leap generally credited to William Kent (1685–1748) and Capability Brown (1715–1783).14 The other essential reference is Roy Strong’s The Italian Renaissance Villa in the English Imagination, 1600–1750. This 1986 book used original documents to describe how the Italian Renaissance garden was perceived and understood.
that would “rival ancient Rome.” Around this “miracles of perfected art” at Nonsuch Palace of the type seen in Italy. A visitor described the first large-scale creation of a heraldic garden representing Queen Elizabeth I and the crown, as a garden and grove. He installed symbols of classical elements into his garden and organizing had visited Italy and by 1559 was adding classical and statues of roman emperors. 1575 to 1585, along with new stairways, logias and ornaments of roman emperors.

These piecemeal adornments at various Eng- lish estates evoked the Italian style, but two other developments were of greater significance. When Sir Francis Willoughby built his house at Wolla- ton in the 1580s, it was “the unique Elizabethan instance of a house and garden conceived as a single architectural unit,” thereby replacing a design principle of the Italian Renaissance villa. A few years later, Wilton House near Salisbury was completely renovated with a full and elabor- ate Italian makeover, including the construction of a grotto with water tricks that became known as the “ancient style” of Italian gardening.

Many additional examples of Italian influ- ence may be traced through the years, notably in the English classical creations of Inigo Jones (c. 1573-1652) and the buildings and gardens of William Kent. Jones studied and observed architecture in Italy, paying special attention to the work of Andrea Palladio (1508-80). Kent lived in Italy from 1709 to 1719. Within Kent’s work, the Italian inspiration was ever present, but he was said to successfully localize it. He could “make Palladian speak good English.” Through the nineteenth and twentieth centu- ries in Britain, interest in the Italian style waxed and waned. The still-famous Italian terraces in County Wicklow, Ireland, at the Powerscourt Estate, link the house with the lake below. Begun in 1643 and 1652, they were completed over 12 years.

An even more important and more fully real- ized Italian garden was built by John Evelyn (1620-1706) at Wotton in Surrey, between 1643 and 1652. Many additional examples of Italian influ- ence may be traced through the years, nota- bly in the English classical creations of Inigo Jones (c. 1573-1652) and the buildings and gardens of William Kent. Jones studied and observed architecture in Italy, paying special attention to the work of Andrea Palladio (1508-80). Kent lived in Italy from 1709 to 1719. Within Kent’s work, the Italian inspiration was ever present, but he was said to successfully localize it. He could “make Palladian speak good English.”

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At times formalism was militantly pitted against the more naturalistic style inspired by the English cottage garden and the Arts and Crafts Movement. During the Victorian era, architect and formalist Reginald Blomfield (1856-1942) and the naturalist:花园的主人回到他的花园从意大利回来。它作为花园和森林。他安装了古典元素到他的花园，并组织化他访问了意大利，并在1559年，他开始添加古典主义元素和雕像罗马皇帝。

The Renaissance Garden in England, a study of English gardens from the crowning of Henry VIII in 1508 to 1642 when the English Civil War began. England responded to all that had happened to garden design in Renaissance Italy. Strong concluded. Under Henry VIII the garden became a symbol of power and wealth. Then “statements” gardens spread from royal palaces to the great houses of England during the long Elizabethan peace. Roy Strong bemoans the loss of these classically designed gardens and bitterly condemns Capability Brown for his role in changing them. A group of Oxford dons in 1659 wrote of their hope that Italian glories and beauties would one day be brought into the English garden, as Americans received contemporary accounts of Italian gardens from early travelers. During his five-month Italian sojourn in 1833, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was entranced by the Villa d’Este outside Rome and the sensuality of Italy (compared to Boston). Catherine Maria Sedgwick (1789-1867), a popular novelist and essayist of the day, introduced her readers to the “perfections” of the Italian gardens she visited in 1839, along with the features she did not like, such as “torturing trees” into topary shapes. At the same time, a leading garden design text discouraged the adoption of the Italian style in the United States. Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852) grew up in the nursery business and developed expertise as a horticulturist, gardener, and journalist. He was the first sig- nificant landscape designer in the United States.

In the influential book that established him as a national authority and tastemaker, A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening Adapted to North America (1841), Downing called “the ancient style” of Italian gardening a labored art, overly reliant on regularity and symmetry. It was therefore inferior to the natural-istic, refined and modern Picturesque style of gardening that Downing favored.

Downing’s Treatise was issued in new editions for 80 years. Seven years after Down- ing’s death, Henry Winding Sargent wrote a lengthy supplement to the sixth edition published in 1859. Sargent brought an open- minded approach to the Italian style and introduced readers to the “most successful” Italian garden in the United States, the creation of financier and horticulturalist Horatio Hollis Hunnewell (1818-1902) in Wellesley.

The renewed interest in the Italian style has been sparked by a new turn of attention to the classical world or a wave of design formality or, as occurred in the Edwardian Era, by the emergence of an extraordinarily skilled prac- tioner. Harold Axonworth Petts (1854-1933) worked in the Italianate style and is recognized as one of the most successful garden design- ers of his generation. Petts’ own home, Ickel Manor, and his famous water garden at Buscot Park, both preserved and open to visitors, are among many testaments to a continuing rever- ence for the Italian style in England.

THE FIRST ITALIAN GARDENS IN THE UNITED STATES

The most successful American gardens of the mid-nineteenth century were the Italianate style and is recognized as one of the most successful garden design- ers of his generation. Petts’ own home, Ickel Manor, and his famous water garden at Buscot Park, both preserved and open to visitors, are among many testaments to a continuing rever- ence for the Italian style in England.

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Downing’s Treatise was issued in new editions for 80 years. Seven years after Down- ing’s death, Henry Winding Sargent wrote a lengthy supplement to the sixth edition published in 1859. Sargent brought an open- minded approach to the Italian style and introduced readers to the “most successful” Italian garden in the United States, the creation of financier and horticulturalist Horatio Hollis Hunnewell (1818-1902) in Wellesley.

Hunnewell had never visited Italy. His garden was directly inspired by travel in England. He saw a sophisticated interpretation of the Italian style as “worth a journey from any part of the United States,”43 as it was “always fresh and inviting,”44 and the finest of its type in the country.45 Despite these positive assessments, Hunnewell’s garden was more admired than influential advised, but it was good to have one in the American South.46 

Inclusion in Downing’s ever-popular Garden and Forest articles described the Hunnewell Italian garden as “by far the finest example of an ‘Italian garden’ with clipped trees and hedges that exists in America.” Such gardens should not be used everywhere or very often, the discerning journalist advised, but it was good to have one in the country and Hunnewell’s garden had already provided hundreds of visitors with their first and only sight of topiary work.47 Three years later Garden and Forest published an admiring article encouraging others to emulate the Hunnewell topiary garden, even on smaller parcels of land. The garden made the author “grateful for a chance to know in our own land some of the charm that haunts the classic grounds of Italy.” Why not capture Old World charm in American gardens?48 Other Garden and Forest articles described the Hunnewell Italian garden as “worth a journey from any part of the United States,”49 as it was “always fresh and inviting,”50 and the finest of its type in the country.51 Despite these positive assessments, Hunnewell’s creation was more admired than copied by others.52 Today, the Hunnewell Estate remains in private ownership and is occasionally open for garden tours. Topiary trees still populate one of the hillsides.53 

Meanwhile, on the western boundary of Georgia, the oldest Italian garden in the United States was thriving, despite being unknown to the horticultural journalists of New York and Boston.54 Ferrell’s Gardens, also called “The Terraces,” predated Hunnewell’s garden by exactly ten years. 

Startled in 1841, the garden was the lifetime work of Sarah Coleman Ferrell (1817-1903). She was a passionate gardener who once wrote that plants and flowers were not just a part of her life, “they were life itself.”55 Her garden was the pride of the region—the “finest garden in 30 states”—and was frequently photographed in periodicals during the 1880s and 90s.56 An attraction from an early date, it is still known as one of the most notable designed landscapes in the American South.57

In her “moral garden” and envisioned an afterlife in spirit.” An enormous acreage was densely planted with trees sheared into pyramids, pillars, round “huts” with conical roofs and other strange shapes.58 

Elvaston’s topiary garden was said to represent a “fairytale Italian” style,59 but it inspired Hunnewell. Back home in Massachusetts, he began in 1853 to lay out a series of formal gardens on a steep lakeside property. The Italian garden was created on six terraces planted with American evergreens shaped into cones, toadstools, globes, pyramids and layered tiers. At the bottom of the topiary hillside, a balustraded walkway ran along Lake Waban. Inclusion in Downing’s ever-popular treatise brought attention to Hunnewell’s gardens and to ways of adapting the Italian style in the United States. By 1889 it was described in the prestigious pages of Garden and Forest as “by far the finest example of an ‘Italian garden’ with clipped trees and hedges that exists in America.” Such gardens should not be used everywhere or very often, the discerning journalist advised, but it was good to have one in the country and Hunnewell’s garden had already provided hundreds of visitors with their first and only sight of topiary work. Three years later Garden and Forest published an admiring article encouraging others to emulate the Hunnewell topiary garden, even on smaller parcels of land. The garden made the author “grateful for a chance to know in our own land some of the charm that haunts the classic grounds of Italy.” Why not capture Old World charm in American gardens? Other Garden and Forest articles described the Hunnewell Italian garden as “worth a journey from any part of the United States,” as it was “always fresh and inviting,” and the finest of its type in the country. Despite these positive assessments, Hunnewell’s creation was more admired than copied by others. Today, the Hunnewell Estate remains in private ownership and is occasionally open for garden tours. Topiary trees still populate one of the hillsides.

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In La Grange, Georgia, around the knoll on which her Gothic Revival home overlooked farmland, Ferrell gardened for 60 years, interpreting the Italian style. The inspiration or guide for the Italian garden she created is a mystery. Sarah Ferrell never visited Italy or traveled beyond Florida. She extended a formal garden of four acres down five terraced levels, building walls and steps with local stone. Ferrell added clipped boxwood hedges, abundant topiary, flowers, and unusual species of specimen trees. She created garden rooms and an allée 16 feet wide. A few large urns were displayed, but no fountains or statuary.

Ferrell believed that developing a garden was an act of religious piety. She referred to her “moral garden” and envisioned an afterlife of flower tending. A distinctive Ferrell signature was topiary shaped into religious messages, his-and-her mottoes and Masonic iconography.

Beneath its idiosyncratic fountains, Ferrell’s garden was geometrically designed with formal axial organization and symmetry. While her guide for this effort is undocumented, she had—at the very least—seen illustrations of the Villa Lante. On a slope she simulated one of its famous designs by planting parallel rows of boxwood, clipped into the undulating “water chains” of the Villa Lante cascade.

Sarah Ferrell died in 1903. The wealthy new owner of her property replaced the house in 1909 with a large Palladian villa appropriate to the garden. Fountains and some classical statuary were added to enhance the Italianate character of the terraces. The estate was renamed Hills & Dales and the new owners became conscientious custodians of the Ferrell garden. It was still carefully maintained when Earl Diaper, an established landscape architect, declared it “an Italian Renaissance example” in a 1932 article for House Beautiful. The house and garden were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979 and are open to visitors today as the Hills & Dales Estate.

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With this book, Platt offered new information and new insight that today are seen as a watershed, though the book did not win universal praise when published. His breakthrough contributions were the "rediscovery of the Italian Renaissance villa garden in its entirety, and his attempts to adapt its scheme to American soil." The scholar of Italian landscape design "acknowledged the book's influence on travel and the expatriate life. Influential British art critic John Ruskin (1818-1900) praised the book's detailed illustrations and its "omissions of decorative trappings," fostering a new appreciation for the Italian landscape.

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A more nuanced appreciation of the Italian Renaissance style developed as garden literature proliferated and Americans traveled to Italy in greater numbers after the American Civil War, and, with improved transportation and growing national wealth, a floodtide was crossing the Atlantic by the 1880s. Travelers of taste learned where to go and what to see from a burgeoning body of literature on travel and the expatriate life. Influential British art critic John Ruskin (1818-1900) praised both emblazoned books and accessible travel guides on Italian art and architecture. Charles Eliot Norton (1827-1900), a leading intellectual and Hellenist art historian, made an early contribution with his Notes of Travel and Study in Italy (1860). Households named after Italian cities or persons living in Italy for many years at a time included author Henry James (1843-1916), among many other Americans living in England, annually decamped to Italy for the winter. His love of the country stimulated 40 years of published travel writing in which James shared the pleasures and perils of Italian life. Collectively, these voices fuelled an increasing American interest in Italy throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in a final decade during which the Italian Renaissance was celebrated in all phases of American visual culture.

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Platt went on to win scores of prestigious commissions, notably edging out Frank Lloyd Wright to design the country estate of Harold F and Edith Rockefeller McCormick at Lake Forest, Illinois. Villa Turcicum was built over ten years, beginning in 1909. Siting the house on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan, Platt terraced the hillside down to the waterfront. Villa Turcicum was lauded as the finest example of Italian-inspired landscape design in the United States and criticized as a derivative reproduction, rather than an appropriate adaptation of Italian villa design principles.

Meanwhile, landscape architecture was emerging as a profession and writings on gardens and landscape design in the United States was growing in sophistication. A standard was set by the insightful art and architecture critic Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer (1851-1934). Publishing in Garden and Forest from 1888, Van Rensselaer undertook a study of the emerging profession she called landscape gardening. In seven essays she outlined the principles of artistic composition and how they applied to garden design, concluding that the profession could be pursued as a fine art. These essays, along with other writings were collected in her 1893 book, Art Out-of-doors: Hints on Good Taste in Gardening.

Two books analyzing American garden style appeared. Old Time Gardens, “the first serious attempt to provide historical notes on American landscape design” was published in 1901. Author Alice Morse Earle commented on the specialty art of the new Italian-style gardens in America.”

The next year, exceptionally well-educated architect Guy Lowell (1870-1927), published American Gardens. Despite the book's title, the work spotlights a geographically limited number of mainly East Coast gardens, with the work of Charles A. Platt liberally represented. Lowell did not invent a national garden history, but his work is a key document in the canon. He presented principles of gardening as an art form (per Van Rensselaer) and showed how large, small, old and new American gardens in the formal style were descendents of the Italian Renaissance garden. Most importantly, Lowell stressed the need to adapt, not copy, foreign garden principles in order to “perfect an American style.” He warned against adherence to dogmatic concepts of formal versus natural landscape design.

These publications, preceded by Charles A. Platt’s writings and extensively published commissions, had described a formal garden revival in the United States and its connection to the Italian Renaissance. The new formality was being celebrated and analyzed in journals and book-length studies. The march toward formalism was reinforced by increasing numbers of classically trained American architects. In addition to the traditional European centers of study, by 1904, the American Academy in Rome was entering its second decade of classical architectural studies for American fellows. Earlier residents of the Academy were back in the United States, bringing an informed appreciation of classical design to their work.

At the turn of the twentieth century, classical forms, formalism and theories on how to appropriately adapt Italian Renaissance landscapes and architecture were on firm footing in the United States. These subjects were not new and did not await discovery, but perhaps they did await accessible elucidation. This was accomplished by the publication and wide distribution of Italian Villas and Their Gardens (1904) written by the novelist Edith Wharton and illustrated by the much-admired Mansfield Parnell. While Wharton did not discover or originate her subject, she analyzed and explained Italian villa structure with a winning intelligence and clarity. She marshalled what could be done with compositions of stone, water and evergreens. She added historical depth to her writing by incorporating extensive scholarly research on villa architecture. Wharton had traveled in Italy since childhood, her transparent love of the country resonated with readers.

The appearance of new editions of Italian Villas and Their Gardens over the past 116 years is an informal means of tracking interest in formal garden-making generally and Italian gardens specifically. As with others who looked to Italy, Wharton never advocated the replication of Italian homes and gardens in the United States. Rather, she attempted to distill the essence of the style, looking not at building shapes and sizes but to the spirit of the Italian villa.

Wharton’s treatment of her subject has not held up over the years. Her book appeared in 1904. With an eye to its popularity and its use of Maxfield Parrish’s artistic illustrations, rather than a large number of documentary photographs, two books took readers back to first principles. Country Life published The Gardens of Italy in 1905, collecting Charles Latham’s exquisite Italian villa photographs with textual explanations by a capable English garden writer, Evelyn March Phillips. The book is a snapshot of Italian villas before two world wars and it preserves the work of Latham, now regarded as one of the twentieth century’s preeminent architectural and landscape photographers. Latham’s photographs were reissued in a 2009 book. The next year, architectural writer H. Triggs published The Art of Garden Design in Italy, a heavily illustrated work with instructual text. It is noted for Triggs’ meticulously prepared sketch plans drawn to scale. He believed that gardens could best be understood by combining plot plans with photographs.
This scholarly work is an essential source for any serious student of Italian garden architecture. It was reprinted in 2007. In response to growing professional interest, the journal Landscape Architecture published dozens of articles on Italian gardens from 1910 through the 1920s. Guy Lowell, who published American Gardens in 1902, made a reappearance. He served with the American Red Cross during World War I in Italy and returned often to gather materials for books on vernacular homes and gardens on a less grand scale than those appearing in earlier publications. Lowell's Small Italian Villas and Farmhouses appeared in 1916 and his More Small Italian Villas and Farmhouses in 1920.

One of the first women to be trained in landscape architecture and to open a practice, Martha Brooks Hutcheson (1871-1959), published The Spirit of the Garden in 1923. She had completed more than 50 design commissions before retiring. In the midst of the Country Place Era when large estates were dominating architectural design attention, Hutcheson spoke to middle-class homeowners who at this time were avidly pursuing gardening. Her graceful and informative writing linked good taste to the Italian style. She believed that formal European styles presented a design model for American gardens, albeit with less emphasis on stylized planting patterns. Hutcheson's book was one of the classic works reprinted by the Library of American Landscape History to commemorate the 1999 centennial of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Two important books on Italian gardens appeared in 1925. J. C. Shepheard and Godfrey-Jelfico published Italian Gardens of the Renaissance. Both were young students at London's Architectural Association. In Italy, they measured and photographed 28 Italian villas and developed brief descriptions. The book's architectural analysis, surveys and elevations were well received and remain in demand; the book has appeared in several editions. An Italian perspective finally reached England and America when art historian Luigi Dalmi published Italian Gardens, which was translated into English (New York: Brentano's Inc., 1925). The work is prized for its wealth of illustrations.

The weighty and scholarly tomes pouring forth were favored by the 1929 contribution of Rose Standish Nichols, a landscape architect who had studied at MIT, Harvard University, and the Ecole des Beaux Arts and trained under Charles A. Platt and Inigo Triggs. Her Italian Pleasure Gardens was a well-received travel guide.

ON THE WANE: THE ITALIAN STYLE GOES OUT OF FASHION

By 1930, the Italian formal style was visible in all types of garden-making across the United States. It was present in small home gardens and had found its way into the Vanderbilts and du Pont estates. Large-scale projects of the Country Place Era celebrated the Italian style in almost every possible variation. At one end of the scale, there was the subtle treatment represented in the work of Beatrix Farrand and Ellen Biddle Shipman (a protégé of Charles A. Platt). At the other, subtlety was set aside in projects like Villa Tuscana in Illinois and Villa Viscaya near Miami. Both tipped toward facsimile.

Between these extremes, almost every permutation of the Italian style was at hand for the observation and education of a new generation of landscape architects born in the 1880s and 90s (Fletcher Steele, Florence Yoch, A. E. Hanson, Charles Gibbs Adams). These practitioners had, in many cases, worked with the first generation who had consciously adapted the Italian style (Platt, Warren H. Manning, Paul Thiene, Ferruccio Vitale). Unlike their mentors, they started careers within an established, dominant style of American landscape architecture. The new generation in many instances continued to be influenced by the Italian style but tended to be less slavish and more imaginative in its application. Others edged toward different traditions. The work of many of these practitioners, and others, will be discussed in Part 2 of this article, with attention focused on the Italian style in California.

The Italian style may have been omnipresent in 1930, but rebellion against classical forms of design was fomenting. Decisive change was coming. In 1920 the United States stock market had disastrously crashed, initiating a reduction of private wealth that would spiral downward for years. The golden age of estate building sputtered to an end. Clients fended away from the work of landscape architects changed. Private commissions gave way to government-funded projects.

In this new reality, American interest in Italian precedents was waning. Books on Italian gardens were no longer flying off the press. Politics played a role as well. The rise of fascism made it difficult to idealize Italian civilization. Most Americans turned away from images of the fascistic Benito Mussolini, who, in 1925, assumed dictatorial control of Italy. British and American expatriates withdrew from their favored Italian haunts and tourist travel to Italy declined precipitously. The natural affinity that had long existed between Americans and all things Italian was badly frayed.

At some indeterminate time in the early 1930s, after four decades of prominence, the Italian landscape style lost its luster and fell out of fashion. Some interest in colonial precedents flickered and Modernism gained ground.
End Notes

3 The most intense period of Italian influence in America is generally dated from 1890 to 1930. Kenworthy does not explain his use of the term "Italianate," but another scholar, Barbara Warren Davidson, specifically avoids the term, thinking that "to identify the Italian model without also having some essential relationship to its principles" in this paper is wrong.

6 This illuminating essay identifies the "stages of evolution" for the concept and use of the term "Italianate," but another scholar, Rebecca Warren Davidson, specifically avoids the term, thinking that "it denotes the Italian model without also having some essential relationship to its principles." In this paper the term "Italian garden" and "Italianate garden" are used interchangeably.

7 Keith N. Morgan, "Italian Garden in American Landscape Architecture." PhD diss., Cornell University, 1994, 1, 235.
8 Morgan, "Rise and Fall of the Italian Garden," 7.
14 John Dixon Hunt, The Garden and Grove: The Italian Renaissance Garden in England. London: Thames and Hudson, 1979, 10-14. A softcover edition of this book is published at 168-69. John Dixon Hunt concluded that Strong's work would be more valuable had he researched more deeply into the next century. The English Civil War drove many into exile in Italy where they were exposed to the Renaissance villa for the first time. A strong Italian influence terminated in America, "as a place where the cult of naturalism has always flourished." Masson, Italian Gardens, 278.
15 Strong, The Italian Garden in France, 11.
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18 Ibid, xvii-xix, 180. With this assertion, Hunt contradicts other English garden historians, including Horace Walpole who believed that William Kent's most perfect garden design was a "simple Italian garden of large proportions." Walpole also praised "the Guests," in Attlee, The Italian Renaissance Garden in the English Imagination, 1600-1750. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986, 63-66. Whileiegled as a "stages of evolution" for the term "Italian garden," and "Italianate garden" are used interchangeably. It is suggested that Strong's work would be more valuable had he researched more deeply into the next century. The English Civil War drove many into exile in Italy where they were exposed to the Renaissance villa for the first time. A strong Italian influence terminated in America, "as a place where the cult of naturalism has always flourished." Masson, Italian Gardens, 278.
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The cover of Edith Wharton's Italian Villas and Their Gardens, 1904.
Members In The News
CGLHS AT MODERNISM WEEK

STEVEN KEYLON, EDEN EDITOR

Modernism Week in Palm Springs provides twice-a-year programming to foster knowledge and appreciation of the architecture, landscape architecture, design, and culture of the mid-century modern movement. The primary event is an eleven-day festival each February, with programming that includes lectures, films, symposia, tours, and parties. The money raised by Modernism Week, a non-profit organization, provides support to both local and state organizations’ efforts to preserve the region’s modern architecture. In addition, the organization offers annual scholarships to local students who choose to pursue college educations in the fields of architecture and design.

In addition to the primary event held each February, Modernism Week offers a “Mini-Modernism,” a four-day “Fall Preview” each October. Modernism Week also provides a platform to explore contemporary considerations surrounding historic preservation, cultural heritage, adaptive reuse, and sustainable architecture.

Modernism Week began in 2006 as a three-day weekend known as “Modernism Weekend.” That first year saw 1,000 attendees and just a handful of events. Lisa Vossler Smith, executive director of Modernism Week, said that in that first year, “the goal was to raise awareness for the incredible archive of modernism in Palm Springs and to help reinforce preservation.” Modernism Week has dramatically expanded over the years: at this year’s event, attendance was estimated at 162,000, with over 375 different events offered. This generated an economic impact of $61 million for local hotels, restaurants, shops, and other businesses throughout the Coachella Valley. Attendees came from twenty different countries, and every single state in the United States was represented, along with the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. Worldwide media coverage generated more than 3.7 billion media impressions, a new record for Modernism Week. According to Vossler Smith: “We aren’t just looking at trends, we are examining what role midcentury modernism played in design and how it informs current designers; we’re looking at the future as well.”
THE LANDSCAPE PROGRAMMING AT MODERNISM WEEK

Though Modernism Week now has a very robust program of landscape-related lectures, tours, and other events, the landscape category did not always exist. According to William Kopelk, landscape architect as well as Modernism Week’s Chairman: “It began with my suggesting and organizing and captaining the Modern Garden Tours probably ten years ago.”

Kopelk called upon landscape designer Paul Ortega, who recalls, “ten years ago William Kopelk contacted me about adding a landscape tour as a part of Modernism Week. My role then, as a volunteer, was to produce our Modern Garden Tour. We held these several years, in the afternoon, and it was successful. Then, we decided to add a speaker the morning before the tour—the idea that people might come for the presentation and then enjoy the tour. The addition of a speaker to the tour was the start of the landscape program’s expansion. We began getting feedback from our guests that they would like to see even more in terms of landscape and outdoor living programming. In the past four years, it has taken off, with a range of presentations and panels, exhibitions, and even a Saturday of one-on-ones with landscape designers. The Modern Garden Tour is still the crowning event, but now it’s surrounded by about a dozen jewels every year.”

Ortega says that after Modernism Week is over, “we contact our guests with a survey about their experiences and what they’d like to see. We receive continued support and enthusiasm for our landscape and outdoor living programming in these surveys, to the point now that landscape programming continues to rank in the top three topics of what people come for, and for what they want to see more of as well. Our tour always sells out, even as we continue to add more and more capacity. Our recent panel on Sunset magazine’s impact on all aspects of modern design, including landscape, in the post-war period, was probably our most popular event that took place in 2020. At the same time, our Saturday of one-on-ones with landscape designers is also extremely popular.”

Some other highlights of past years include a panel led by Charles Birnbaum, president and CEO of The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF), in conversation with landscape architects Cornelia Oberlander and Harriet Pattison, which took place in 2017. The following year, TCLF presented “The Landscape Architecture Legacy of Dan Kiley,” a photography exhibition that celebrated the work of the artist.

CGLHS members have participated at Modernism Week for the last several years. In 2018, CGLHS past president Kelly Comras, FASLA and the biographer of landscape architect Ruth Shellhorn, presented “Designing the Disneyland Landscape.” Her lecture included a short film and rare photographs, which documented the creation of the landscape at Disneyland, which, besides Shellhorn, included the involvement of Jack and Bill Evans and architect Welton Becket.

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Steven Keylon, CGLHS past president, and Eden editor presented his lecture from the 2017
CGLHS conference in Palm Springs, “Landscapes for Leisure,” wherein he discussed the landscapes designed for the Coachella Valley from the 1920s through the 1960s. In 2019, Keylon presented “The Glamorous Gardens of Tommy Tomson,” a subject he has written about for Eden. Comras participated in a panel discussion, “The Midcentury Modern Campus of UC Riverside” discussing the initial design of the campus, created by Fred Barlow, Jr., and the subsequent design by Ruth Shellhorn. Shellhorn served as the campus landscape architect at UC Riverside for many years.

In 2020, there were a variety of Modernism Week activities with the involvement of CGLHS members:

• Kelly Comras, FASLA, gave a lecture “Welton Becket & Ruth Shellhorn: The Commercial & Retail Projects.” Her talk explored the collaboration of architect Welton Becket and landscape architect Ruth Shellhorn on fifteen projects that helped put post-war Los Angeles on the map. After the lecture, she signed copies of her book Ruth Shellhorn, published by the Library of American Landscape History (LALH).

• Steven Keylon participated in a panel discussion organized by the Pacific Horticultural Society titled “Desertscaping: Past, Present and the Future.” The panelists discussed climate-appropriate desert gardening, which, in the face of severe climate change, will become even more critical. Some of the benefits discussed were the retention of water during drought, habitat support for struggling migratory birds, and other benefits such as smart planting and soil management. The other panelists were Pamela Berstler, Executive Director of Pacific...
Horticulture Society, landscape designer Paul Ortega, and biologist Clayton Tschudy.

• Robin Karson, Honorary ASLA and founder and executive director of the Library of American Landscape History (LALH), lectured on landscape architect Lockwood de Forest Jr., calling him a “Santa Barbara Proto-Modernist.” Karson focused primarily on Lockwood de Forest Jr.’s 1926 design for his own house and garden in Santa Barbara.

• Jonathan D. Lippincott, LALH assistant director, presented “The American Garden at Midcentury,” which covered some of the important American landscape architects of the midcentury modern period, including Thomas Church, Garrett Eckbo and Dan Kiley.

• JC Miller, landscape architect and author of the new LALH book Robert Royston, presented a lecture about Royston’s landscape design, with an emphasis on his residential projects. The final portion of Miller’s talk focused on Royston’s last commission, a series of gardens for the Palm Springs homes of CGLHS members and donors Brent R. Harris and Lisa Meulbroek. Miller discussed the experience of working directly with Royston on the design of the project, and his continued collaboration with the owners through the years as they finished the project.

One of the highlights of this year’s landscape programming followed Miller’s lecture. “Robert Royston in Palm Springs: A Book Signing and Tour of the Circle and Becket House Gardens” offered attendees a very rare visit to Royston’s final project, two contiguous gardens designed by Royston in 2007 and implemented at the direction of landscape architect and author JC Miller after Royston’s death in 2008. CGLHS members who received View, LALHS annual journal, will recall the house featured prominently on its cover (with gorgeous photography by CGLHS member Millicent Harvey). The garden is located on a one-acre site with two architecturally significant modern homes. The first, built in 1957, was designed by Welton Becket and Associates. A second larger house, known as the Hefferlin House for its first owners, was designed a few years later by San Diego architect Richard George Wheeler (with later additions by the architect Albert Frey). The event offered ample time to tour the gardens and linger on the many unique spaces carved out of the large site. Then, a conversation between JC Miller garden owner Brent Harris illuminated the fascinating years-long process to implement Royston’s final design. Guests received an advance copy of Miller’s book about Royston, and the author was around to sign books at the end of a beautiful evening.

THE FUTURE OF LANDSCAPE AT MODERNISM WEEK

According to Paul Ortega, “with this year’s Modernism Week behind us, we are already planning for the coming year. Right now, we are looking for more new and interesting presenters and panelists. I strive to have a balance between topics related to the history of modern landscape design and its practitioners, those practicing today with an eye toward contemporary concepts, and on topics that appeal to a more do-it-yourself audience. I am also planning to include more about sustainable design and practices, a trend we see in our other parts of Modernism Week offerings, such as architecture and interior design. We would also like to increase our landscape tour offerings, perhaps outside of Palm Springs and on different days. The primary challenge is capacity, both in our theater setting, as well as finding appropriate garden locations with owners that are open to hosting large groups. But it is a challenge we are excited to meet.”
Front Cover:
Winter dramatic clouds and end of day light capture the beauty of an elder Smoke Tree in Araby Wash, Palm Springs.

Back Cover:
Detail of a Smoke Tree in Bloom - Cathedral City Cove - Cathedral City.
Photos by Millicent Harvey.