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Celebrating Horticultural Champions

Meet the distinguished recipients of the

2022 AHS Great American Gardeners Awards

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LIBERTY HYDE BAILEY AWARD

The American Horticultural Society's highest award, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Award is given to an individual who has made significant lifetime contributions to at least three of the following horticultural fields: teaching, research, communications, plant exploration, administration, art, business, and leadership.

Named after Liberty Hyde Bailey (1858–1954), horticulturist, educator, author. First awarded in 1958.

The winner of this year's Liberty Hyde Bailey Award, **Bart O'Brien**, has been a leading figure in Western horticultural circles for more than four decades. "He has tirelessly promoted California native plant horticulture in particular as well as helped to conserve the state's incredible biodiversity," says Carol Bornstein, former director of the Nature Garden at the Los Angeles Natural History Museum. "He also is an extraordinary plantsman, with extensive knowledge of plants from California as well as other Mediterranean climate regions and beyond."

Since 2013, O'Brien has been director of the Regional Parks Botanic Garden (RPBG) in Berkeley, California, which is part of the East Bay Regional Park District. Prior to that he spent the bulk of his career—almost 20 years—in a variety of roles at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden (RSABG)—which has since been renamed the California Botanic Garden (CBG)—in Claremont, California. At RSABG, he served as director of horticulture and director of special projects, plant introductions and sales.

"At Regional Parks Botanic Garden, Bart has been instrumental in the enhancement of the collections in this beautiful and tranquil living museum, including the development of one of the largest and most artfully constructed crevice gardens in North America," says Randy Baldwin, president of San Marcos Growers in Santa Barbara, California.

At Rancho Santa Ana, he orchestrated the garden's impressive fall plant sales, making an incredible array of common as well as hard to find native taxa available to home gardeners and landscape professionals alike. While Director of Special Projects, Bart helped secure grant funds to launch a satellite nursery for the garden in collaboration with the local Veterans Administration that helped train former veterans in nursery production. He co-ordinated several highly successful symposia hosted by RSABG under the title "Out of the Wild and Into the Garden," bringing together expert horticulturists and botanists from across the state to share their knowledge. In 1999, O'Brien initiated and co-directed the Pacific Plant Promotions program for introducing unusual plants to the gardening public, along with horticulturist Kathy Musial at the Huntington Botanical Garden and Richard Turner, who was then editor of *Pacific Horticulture* magazine. This program is still active.



FAMILY, FRIEND, FAN, OR COLLEAGUE OF AN AWARD RECIPIENT?

Show your support by sponsoring your favorite awardee and you'll help AHS spread the great news about their professional and personal accomplishments! You'll also help grow the awards program for future deserving gardeners. Every awardee deserves the most recognition for their accomplishments, so help AHS brag about how awesome they are!

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Research and Publications

As part of his research, O'Brien has done extensive fieldwork throughout California, particularly focused on the southern inner coast ranges, San Benito County, and the eastern Mojave ranges; also in Baja California, Mexico, primarily in the California Floristic Province (from the U.S. border south to El Rosario, and adjacent Pacific islands). Major research accomplishments included being a lead author and project manager for the Checklist of the Flora of the California Floristic Province portion of Baja California, Mexico, Project, in 2011–2013, and the Rare, Endangered, and Endemic Plants of the California Floristic Province portion of Baja California, Mexico, Project, from 2009–2013.

In addition to writing or co-authoring nearly 100 articles about plants and ecology in scholarly journals and popular magazines, O'Brien served as editor of *Fremontia*, the scientific journal of the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) from 2006 to 2009. The publication was recently renamed *Artemisia*, and O'Brien remains a member of its editorial board. A highly sought-after public speaker, O'Brien also loves to share his knowledge about plants and horticulture with audiences of all kinds.

O'Brien is the co-author of three well-regarded gardening books. The first, *California Native Plants for the Garden* (with Carol Bornstein and David Fross), published by Cachuma Press in 2005, received the AHS's Annual Book Award. In 2006, O'Brien collaborated with Betsey Landis and Ellen Mackey on the *Care and Maintenance of Southern California Native Plant Gardens*, published by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California. Richard Turner, editor emeritus of *Pacific Horticulture* magazine, says the impact of this book is particularly important because of its bilingual—Spanish and English—approach, which he says, "serves to educate a portion of the state's population that is typically ignored in garden writing. Yet, the Latino segment of our society is disproportionately involved in the garden and landscape maintenance industry despite, historically, little attempt to provide an adequate education to those whose efforts have such an impact on our urban and exurban lives." O'Brien teamed up again with Bornstein and Fross on *Reimagining the California Lawn* (Cachuma Press, 2011).

Plant Explorations and Introductions

O'Brien is a renowned plant explorer who has done extensive fieldwork in California, collecting for the RPBG living collections as well as for Rancho Santa Ana. Over the course of his career, O'Brien has selected and introduced close to 40 cultivars of California native plants to the nursery trade. "He is a superb horticulturist," says Panayoti Kelaidis, director of outreach at the Denver Botanic Garden. "He has selected numerous cultivars of salvia, manzanita (*Arctostaphylos* spp.), *Epilobium*, and a dozen other genera, many of which he showcased in a spectacular garden at Rancho Santa Ana." One of his manzanita selections, *Arctostaphylos edmundsii* 'Bart's Beauty', was named for him by Barbara Eisenstein, who was a colleague at Rancho Santa Ana.

Getting Started

After earning a BS in Environmental Planning and Management at the University of California, Davis, O'Brien went on to graduate from the master's program in landscape architecture at Harvard University Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His first job in horticulture was as a landscape designer with Cambrian Nursery in San Jose, where he provided landscape consultations and designs for residential clients in the early 1980s.

After another stint as a landscape design consultant, O'Brien joined Yerba Buena Nursery in Woodside, California, in the late 1980s. Founded by Gerda Isenberg, Yerba Buena was one of the earliest retail nurseries devoted to California native plants. His experience finding and propagating plants in the wild and observing the need for more native plants in the retail nursery trade was invaluable when he made the transition to public horticulture in 1990.

Accolades

In recognition of his many years of service to the California Native Plant Society, O'Brien was named a Fellow in 2018. Among the many other regional organizations, he has been active with is the Southern California Horticultural Society, where he was for many years co-chair of their speakers' program committee and regularly conducted the plant forum at monthly meetings. He served as the organization's president from 2002 to 2006 and was named its Horticulturist of the Year in 2005. His professional affiliations include life membership in a wide variety of plant societies, including the American Conifer Society, the Cactus and Succulent Society, the California Botanical Society, the North American Rock Garden Society, and the Society for Pacific Coast Native Iris. He has been made an honorary member of the California Garden Clubs and the Garden Club of America.

"While California's native flora has been the primary focus of Bart's career, gardeners, botanists, and plant lovers worldwide have been the beneficiaries of his passion for all plants," says Turner. "Through his efforts, our own native plants and those from similar dry climates are now more widely accepted for use in private and public landscapes—a critical shift, given the changes in climate already being experienced in most of the arid West."



FRIENDS OF THE

REGIONAL PARKS BOTANIC GARDEN

NATIVE PLANTS OF CALIFORNIA

April 2022 Newsletter

The American Horticultural Society Honors Bart O'Brien



Regional Parks Botanic Garden Director Bart O'Brien, photo by Alicia Springer.

The American Horticultural Society has chosen Bart O'Brien, Director of the Regional Parks Botanic Garden, as the recipient of the [2022 Liberty Hyde Bailey Award](#). The American Horticultural Society's highest award, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Award is given to an individual who has made significant lifetime contributions to at least three of the following horticultural fields: teaching, research, communications, plant exploration, administration, art, business, and leadership.

The AHS names Bart as "a leading figure in Western horticultural circles for more than four decades," citing his directorship at our Garden since 2013, preceded by 24 years in a variety of roles at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden (RSABG) in Claremont, California (which has since been renamed the California Botanic Garden). At RSABG, he served as director of horticulture and director of special projects, plant introductions and sales. In addition, he served as editor of the California Native Plant Society's *Fremontia* journal (recently renamed *Artemisia*) from 2006 to 2009, authored many scientific papers, and spread the word to a wide audience about gardening with California native plants as co-author of three influential gardening books.

"He has tirelessly promoted California native plant horticulture in particular as well as helped to conserve the state's incredible biodiversity," says Carol Bornstein, former director of the Nature Garden at the Los Angeles Natural History Museum. "He also is an extraordinary plantsman, with extensive knowledge of plants from California as well as other Mediterranean climate regions and beyond."

"It was completely unexpected," related Bart when asked about the award, "but a great honor. It gave me pause when David Sherertz [Co-chair of the Friends of the Regional Parks Botanic Garden] compared the award to winning the equivalent of a horticultural Nobel Prize, in light of the stature of many past recipients. I was speechless when I received the phone call. All I could say was that I was extremely honored." Some of those illustrious past recipients include Peter Raven, Ladybird Johnson, Mildred Mathias, Jim Folsom, Panayoti Kelaidis, Daniel Hinkley, Francis Cabot, and Elizabeth McClintock, profiled in the article above.

Read more about the Liberty Hyde Bailey Award and about Bart O'Brien's contributions to American horticulture [here](#).