

# Heather

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North American Heather Society



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### Albers Vista Gardens

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Our 2012 Conference in the Pacific Northwest, conceived by Alice Knight and Karla Lortz and so meticulously planned and managed by Ella May Wulff, featured some beautiful public and private gardens. One of the latter – or rather fourteen – that had several features of interest to me personally belonged to John Albers and his wife, Santica Marcovina, in East Bremerton, Washington. Delegates were blessed with glorious weather for our visit there.

In 1998, John and his wife acquired the house and adjoining land (nearly four acres) on a hillside that faces southwest, overlooking the Port Washington Narrows of the Puget Sound. They later purchased another two acres of land and set about the task of clearing invasive Himalayan blackberries and Scotch broom that covered the new area. After the brambles and broom had been removed, they planted conifers, strategically placed to create a garden framework. They then added additional trees, shrubs, and perennials to fit the design they had developed. John was passionate about sustainability; therefore, the non-native plants were carefully selected to be compatible with the site and local conditions: they wanted plants that would “take care of themselves”.

Dr. Albers took us first to the John Lentz Garden (a memorial to the late *Rhododendron* enthusiast) and introduced us to Sam, a young man with a keen interest in and intimate knowledge of the gardens, who helped to guide us during our visit. Near the doctor's left foot as he spoke to us, I spotted a rarity, a variety of the dwarf swamp cypress *Taxodium distichum* ‘Peve Minaret’. This was still very young but was a surprise on what seemed a well-drained site subject to drought. A deciduous conifer, it has a superb burnt orange colour in the fall and makes a columnar tree ideal for smaller gardens. It may, in time, become too large for that particular location, being slow growing rather than a genetic

dwarf. In the John Lentz garden was one of many examples of art to be found throughout the gardens: a large vase set in stones in the middle of the lawn, which was one of the few fairly level areas on the hillside.

Year round colour through foliage and flower was an outstanding feature of Albers Vista. This was not just through the heathers but also the many other kinds of shrubs and trees. As we walked along another of the areas, the Restoration Area, we could not miss the barberries. *Berberis thunbergii* 'Rose Glow' (see pg. 12) was outstanding and went well with the heathers. Behind them can be seen an *Oxydendrum arboreum*, the sourwood or sorrel tree, a member of the Ericaceae from the southeast of the United States which has good white blossom in spring and brilliant fall colour of maroon or burgundy. We could only imagine what the Albers Vista Gardens would be like by the beginning of October or in late April but did not have to wait long, as views of the fall colours have been placed on their Facebook page, which has pictures of the garden in all seasons.

Link: [www.facebook.com/albers.vista.gardens](http://www.facebook.com/albers.vista.gardens)

Another of the garden areas was Sam's Conifer Reserve (conifers being Sam's specialty), identified by a beautiful granite stone. This had mainly dwarf conifers of many species, but there were a few young heathers here, too. During our stroll, we passed a secluded spot with a stone bench, Santica was responsible for many delightful garden features, of which this was an example. For those who feel that quality stonework gives an additional dimension to a garden, this will have strengthened their views. An interesting garden theme was the Pollination Pathway, illustrating how the gardeners were working with nature rather than against it.

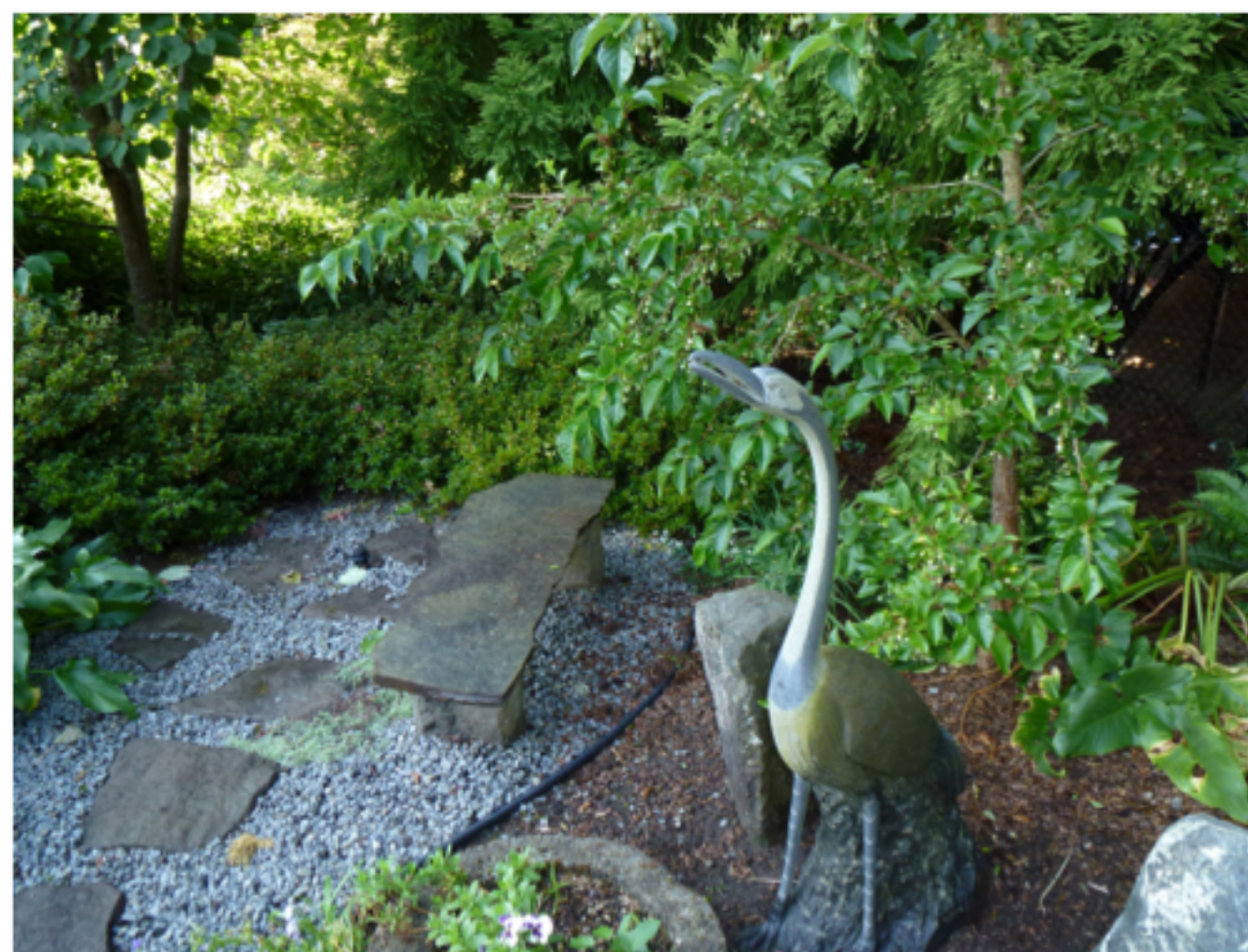


An engraved stone notifies visitors that they have arrived at Sam Pratt's Conifer Reserve. Photo by Richard Canovan.



A large bell serves as a focal point in the conifer reserve. Photo by Richard Canovan.

Around the sign can be seen the many rounded stones and how attractively they have been used in between neatly rounded shrubs to enhance the effect of the shrubs, as well as for the paths.



Santica Marcovina was responsible for many delightful garden features, including this secluded spot with stone bench and bird statue. Photo by Richard Canovan.

The main area of heathers was in the Stroll Gallery. As we walked around admiring the health of the plants and how they complemented each other and the other plants, we spotted one misnamed. As with all gardens we visit, we help with renaming of any plants incorrectly labelled. Led by Ella May, who set us an example, at the request of Dr. Albers we attached what we thought were the correct names to several heathers whose labels



The pollination pathway at Albers Vista. Photo by Richard Canovan.



Ella May Wulff, watched by John Calhoun (left), places a new label on a heather whose original label had been lost. Photo by Richard Canovan.

had been lost. We even tried to use the *Royal Horticultural Society's Colour Chart* fans for help, with *THS's Handy Guide to Heathers* to assist in the process. However, there was much discussion over one *Erica cinerea*. Only a few names appeared to be wrong on the

day we visited, but there are a few omissions from their website: two that I specifically noted during our visit were *Calluna vulgaris* 'Yellow Beauty', which showed no sign of disease or reversion, and *Erica vagans* 'Kevernensis Alba'. These do not appear in the website lists of plants for any of the garden areas.

Looking down towards the inlet in a southerly direction from the Stroll Gallery revealed how well the heathers had been used to create drifts and banks of colour at different times of the year while complementing each other. There were no overpowering massed blooms, and the effect was restful on the eye. From up the hill, one had a good view of the inlet and Olympic Mountains through and over the trees. But in time, this view will be reduced as the trees grow larger.

But did Albers Vista Gardens achieve the vista? Only partially, as looking in a more south-easterly direction there was none, really. There the garden was framed by conifers and deciduous trees of varying heights, with no clear view out except from up the hill, such as in Santica's Perfect Solitude, from where Mount Rainier is visible on a clear day. Those of us who were privileged to be on the tour of public and private gardens on Bainbridge Island after the 2008 International Conference will remember, among others, the garden of Carol Johansson with its sweep of lawn down the slope to the sea, framed by conifers with dense foliage. Perhaps more could have been done to achieve this effect: for example, by using a sweep of *Erica cinerea* 'Celebration'. However, perhaps they did not find the partly urban coastline worth framing in that way, and the tree species selected provide an excellent garden backdrop.

John and Santica have achieved a botanic treasure trove that appears free of invasive species despite containing more than a thousand plants and hence achieves John's idea of sustainability. In 2007, the Albers Vista Gardens of Kitsap Foundation was set up. This is a non-profit organisation with a volunteer board of directors to maintain and preserve the garden for future generations and to promote understanding, appreciation, and stewardship of plant diversity. We NAHS conference delegates certainly appreciated their ideas and how the plants seemed so happy, and we were grateful to John and Sam for guiding us through this fabulous tapestry of colour and form.

For more information about Albers Vista Gardens, visit their website at: [www.albersvistagardens.org](http://www.albersvistagardens.org)