Ralph Cornell and the “College in a Garden”

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Think of all the Arcadias and Avalons and Ardens of the world, of the wonder-waters and the enchanted lands. Think of the hushed benediction of the skies of Italy, shining between Alps and sea; of the quick fruitfulness of Egypt’s ancient sands nursed by the Nile; of the patient thrift of Holland’s open plains rescued from the sea; of the yield of the Rhine-slopes of Germany sunning on a thousand hills; of the luxuriance of Sahara’s chance oases watered by the desert wells; of the rich pampas plains of Argentina, bordered by the far horizons; of the color and perfume of the rose-gardens of Persia, scenting all the winds that blow—think of all these places of beauty and abundance, and I will show you a duplicate of any one of them in my California of the many moods. She produces under one sky all that those other lands produce under their far-scattered skies.

-Edwin Markham, from California the Beautiful
When I first visited Pomona College after being admitted in April of 2007, the campus struck me as feeling very different from its surroundings. Driving from Ontario Airport with my father, I felt like I was entering a hostile environment very different from my home of Massachusetts as we passed channelized streams, the gaping holes of abandoned quarries and the smog of the Inland Empire. When we arrived at Pomona, however, I felt as if I were entering an oasis of green, an enclave of learning where the expansive lawns and Eastern landscape plants I knew from my home of Massachusetts met the sycamores, redwoods and palm trees of the West Coast --- a place familiar and new in which I could picture myself spending the next four years of my life.

My first experience visiting Pomona College and my attraction to the campus’s landscape was not coincidental, or out-of-the-ordinary; in fact, a celebrated tenet of Pomona’s self-image is that of being a “college in a garden.” The first two sentences of the first tab on the college’s website (under “About Pomona,” entitled “An Introduction to Pomona College,”) read: “In the desert landscape that was inland Southern California in 1887, it took audacity to imagine a ‘college in a garden.’ Yet far from the ivied halls of the Northeast, Pomona’s founders envisioned ‘a college of the New England type,’ with small classes, closer relationships between students and faculty, and a green jewel of a campus.”

Thus, Pomona College’s Congregationalist founders --- graduates of Williams, Colby, Dartmouth and Yale --- sought to recreate an institution and campus landscape similar to those they had left behind in the East. When they arrived in the town the Pacific Land Improvement Company had christened “Claremont the Beautiful,” they were confronted with a “gently sloping rocky plain covered with sagebrush and mesquite, with clumps of oak and sycamore trees and patches of swamp land.” Charles Sumner writes in his book The Story of Pomona College that
many of the faculty families who moved to Claremont when the College moved there from Pomona, “perhaps a little homesick, looked round about on the immediate surroundings and pronounced the scene lonely, desolate, hopeless beyond description.”\textsuperscript{4} The newcomers then “understandably set about trying to make the campus and town resemble the places from which they came in the Midwest and New England, bringing rosebushes, shrubs and trees to be planted around Claremont Hall in 1889.”\textsuperscript{5} In 1890, Henry Palmer, the first President of Pomona College’s Board of Trustees, and Astronomy Professor Frank Brackett planted a line of Eucalyptus trees (\textit{Eucalyptus viminalis}) along College Avenue. And an 1894 \textit{Student Life} article announced that “the College has engaged a practiced landscape gardener to lay out the grounds and improve the park and streets,” a commitment to beautification reflected in the formation of a 3-member committee on sidewalks and shade trees at Claremont’s first Town Meeting.\textsuperscript{6}

While landscaping first served as a way of transforming Claremont into a more familiar and hospitable location for the College’s staff and faculty, it soon became a way to attract students as well. Starting around 1910, Pomona began a campaign to become an institution of national significance by attracting students from the East Coast. A 1910 brochure noted that Pomona was “A College on the Pacific which attracts students from the Atlantic and the Interior,” while a 1917 recruitment brochure suggested:

\begin{quote}
Would it not be a great experience for the eastern lad to be equally cosmopolitan---to share the advantages of the splendid educational system of the Pacific coast, feel the momentum of the western world?\textsuperscript{7}
\end{quote}

Continuing along in the same vein, the brochure reads:

\begin{quote}
A man may go East. There is the older education. There, too, are the traditions and memories of men and events with their obvious inspirations. There are also great established institutions. There is much there to make strong appeal.

On the other hand… Pomona College is just at the doors of Los Angeles; it is a part of the Southwest, a city and region surging forward as is no other part of America ... a place of life and citizenship in this opening land of the future.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}
Just as historian Douglas Sackman writes in his essay *A Garden of Worldly Delights*, “Gardens are anthropogenic landscapes, the result of humans shaping nature into patterns that they find hospitable, inviting, and desirable,” Pomona College’s desire to attract Easterners made it imperative for the campus landscape to entice, invite, and intrigue potential students. It is clear that the development of a unique campus landscape at Pomona during the first few decades of the 20th century was at least partly successful, as travel writers described the campus grounds as “idyllic, ‘unspoiled,’ and ‘the college in a garden.’” A 1949 Pomona College brochure read, “Located in Claremont, California, a charming town of 4,000 people, [Pomona] has attained in academic distinction and in the beauty of its campus the quality of its older sisters in the East.” Needless to say, its images of Marston Quadrangle, Harwood Court, the ivy-covered Carnegie,
Holmes, Mason and Bridges Halls and the Bosbyshell Fountain Court spoke as loud if not louder than the publication’s text.

Like the other towns of Southern California, each vying for the title of “garden spot of earth,” Claremont also strove to “[remake] its landscape in Eden’s image” during this period, as is apparent from the 1939 photograph of the town above, in which Claremont seems almost like a forest surrounded by fields and orchards sprouting from the sage scrub of San Antonio Wash beneath the San Gabriel Mountains. Writing about this period, historian Douglas Sackman writes, “Southern Californians grew fruit trees, and they grew ornamental trees. Their identity, and economy, became fixed to plants… The region’s inhabitants, many of them newcomers who had been drawn to the place by pictures of its lush landscape, took up gardening in earnest,” planting “for beauty as well as for the market” and worked to “[remake] the landscape in Eden’s image.” But “aesthetic delight in this cultural landscape was ultimately subordinated to a drive to turn place into profit,” Sackman continues. “This is the magic that growth machines perform, turning landscape into an economic engine.”

Similarly, the landscaping of Pomona College and the other Claremont Colleges was a tool used to attract alumni and other potential donors as well as students. For example, the September 1931 Pomona College Bulletin, entitled “An Invitation,” described Pomona as a “community founded by culture-loving pioneers, devoted to the pursuit of learning, undisturbed by the cross currents of a more complex environment; a community wherein youth may find an ideal atmosphere in which to develop under expert tutelage.” The booklet, designed to solicit donations, featured a center-fold with an aerial view of the college with its elegantly-manicured grounds and countless trees in great contrast with the rest of the San Antonio Wash area. Pictures of lavishly-landscaped academic buildings follow each other one-after-another, while one spread
Aerial view of Pomona College, 1938.

featuring photographs of Marston Quadrangle read “Acres of Beauty Devoted to Culture.” A similar document designed by Gerald Horton Bath and Associates in 1938 to recommend the Claremont Colleges to potential supporters of the Consortium advertised: “Sunny courtyards,
quiet patios and beautiful gardens help to make an ideal environment for study on campuses surrounded by fragrant orange orchards… The word ‘college’ at Claremont means not merely buildings and equipment but an intellectual environment in which scholars ‘live and think together.’” Beautiful landscaping was thus an essential ingredient in fundraising strategies for Pomona College and the Consortium during the first half of the 20th century.

However, the landscape of Pomona College functions as more than a mere advertisement, a ploy to attract students from more verdant regions of the United States or money from donors. It is literally --- as Gerald Horton Bath and Associates wrote --- the “intellectual environment in which scholars ‘live and think together.’” Pomona’s campus is where its students spend four of the most formative years of their lives reading, studying, learning, playing sports, sleeping, eating, discussing, making friends, falling in love, and growing up. As the setting for college life, it may be overlooked and taken for granted, literally fading into the back of one’s mind. But Pomona’s landscape invariably exerts a subtle power over its students (and other community members), many of whom rarely leave campus--- eliciting as scholar W. J. T. Mitchell writes in the preface to his anthology Landscape and Power “a broad range of emotions and meanings that may be difficult to specify.” Landscape has the power to shape and influence who we are and what we do. It is in Mitchell’s words “a process by which social and subjective identities are formed.”

The Pomona College garden is a “cultural and historical project” and a costly “expression of power in the [campus] landscape,” an instrument of power inextricably linked to the idea of Pomona College itself. But it is also the setting in which the Pomona College education takes place. In the context of Pomona College’s mission statement --- to educate “men and women of exceptional promise” and inspire its students “to engage in the probing inquiry
and creative learning that enable them to identify and address their intellectual passions” in order to guide their contributions as the “next generation of leaders, scholars, artists and citizens” --- the campus landscape thus deserves close examination and scrutiny.²¹ What is the nature of the “small residential community” in which Pomona gathers its students? What influence does the college landscape have on its students? And who was --- and is --- responsible for its design?

While even a narrow definition of the Pomona College landscape would certainly include everything contained within its 140 acres, including buildings, classrooms, pathways, and roads, the concept of Pomona as a “college in a garden” suggests that we consider the plantings (or grounds) of Pomona College as an integral part of its landscape. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus almost exclusively on the “garden landscape” of Pomona College.

French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space suggests we break down “landscape” into conceived space, or the “planned, administered and consciously constructed terrain of engineers, city planners, and architects;” perceived space, the “spatial practices” or “daily activities and performances” that take place in any given landscape; and the lived or representational space of its inhabitants and users.²² Because Pomona College and its grounds are carefully designed and administered --- as is apparent when sprinklers turn on at night, College employees are spotted blowing leaves off of walkways, and when scores of groundskeepers appear on campus every Spring Break to cut back vines, trim hedges and remove or replace plants --- I will emphasize Lefebvre’s idea of “conceived” or “conceptualized” space in my exploration of the history of Pomona’s original landscape design as that which leads to both perceived and representational space.

If the concept of the “college in a garden” is an example of “conceptualized space” produced by a landscape architect, then it is to Ralph Cornell we must turn, the man who was
indisputably responsible for designing Pomona’s overall campus landscape and the plantings that led to its reputation as “garden.” For, as Lefebvre writes in The Production of Space: “Every social space is the outcome of a process with many aspects and many contributing currents, signifying and non-signifying… Every social space has a history, one invariably grounded in nature.”23 To understand the social space of Pomona College as garden, we must in turn understand the “aspects” and “currents” influencing the growth of Cornell as landscape architect in the context of early 20th century Los Angeles.
Ralph Dalton Cornell was born in Holdrege, Nebraska on January 11th, 1890, the son of a coal and lumber man. His family moved to Long Beach, California in 1908 as his father hoped (and failed) to cash in on the eucalyptus boom at that time, and Cornell began school at Pomona College in the fall of 1909. After a brief year-long break to make money to finish his schooling, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude in 1914. He then attended the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1914 and graduated with a Masters in Landscape Architecture in 1917. After serving in the 91st Division in Belgium and France during World War I, he returned to Los Angeles in 1919 and opened the first professional landscape architecture firm in Los Angeles. That same year he was brought on as supervising master landscape architect for
Pomona College, a position he would occupy for over forty years during which time he designed Marston Quad, Harwood Court, and innumerable other plantings on the College’s grounds.

Given the length of his tenure and the significance of his landscape designs and contributions to the Pomona College campus, Cornell has been credited more than anyone else with the design and establishment of Pomona as a “college in a garden.” In the words of Dr. Robert Bernard upon presenting an award to Cornell in May 1965:

His service to this college has established it as ‘A College in a Garden,’ to use the memorable words of the late President James A. Blaisdell. Under Ralph Cornell’s patient and continuing oversight, this campus of great trees, vines, shrubs, flowers, plazas and mountain vistas has become a setting which is the pride of all who come under its inspiring influence, --- not the least of whom are returning alumni.¹ Nature is kind to California, and under this man’s imaginative and orderly concepts of campus planning, nature with some assistance has brought us the full measure of what we enjoy today.

And Pomona College’s campus was not Ralph Cornell’s only major landscaping project. He was also the supervising landscape architect at UCLA from 1937-72, and landscaped a number of important Southern California sites as diverse as Torrey Pines Park in San Diego, the Los Angeles Music Center, La Brea Tar Pits, Beverly Gardens, Glen Haven Memorial Park, Oak Park Cemetery, and multiple years of the National Orange Show in San Bernardino, California. He was described in a 1957 issue of The Magazine of Western Landscape Industry as having “done more to change the complexion of Southern California than any other person,” a man “considered by his confreres in the profession as the dean of California landscape architects.”²⁵ “Landscape Architect Ralph D. Cornell,” the editors continued, “is truly making his mark on the world: It is impressive over much of the landscape of one corner of the West and has been calculated to create better living for us all as a result.”²⁶ When he died in April 1972, his impact was judged great enough that the California Horticultural Journal released a memorial issue

¹ Emphasizing again the role of Pomona’s grounds as an economic engine.
dedicated solely to him, its author writing “In April of this year, California lost a plantsman who loved, preserved, and interpreted the California landscape for over sixty years.”

Nowhere is this more true than at his alma mater. Though Cornell was beholden to the desires of Pomona’s administrators and trustees, correspondence between Ralph Cornell and President James Blaisdell makes it clear that Blaisdell was more than willing to defer to Cornell’s judgement on plant selection and site design and to fund his projects almost indiscriminately, as were future Presidents of the College. Thus if we are to understand Pomona’s garden landscape as conceptualized, shaped space produced by a landscape architect, we must then ask: What was Ralph Cornell’s milieu? What was the social, cultural and historical background to his life? How did he become interested in horticulture, and what led him to become a landscape architect? And what was Ralph Cornell’s philosophy of landscaping, and how did it manifest itself in the design and maintenance of Pomona’s “college in a garden?”
Youth and Education

When Ralph Cornell first entered Pomona College as a student in the fall of 1909, the campus was a far cry from what it is today. The campus consisted of less than five buildings, and there was no sign of the carefully-manicured grounds that would come later. Blanchard Park (or the Wash) was “something of a jungle…” where the boys used to go “to have a real wicked smoke,” and was still quite wild, with shooting stars, mariposa lilies, conchalagua (*Centaurium venustum*), yellow violets, purple nightshades, yellow wallflowers and showy penstemons.28 “Even ten years ago it could still truthfully be said that Claremont lay in the sagebrush belt,”
recalled Cornell of this period, “for she was bounded on the north by sagebrush, on the east by sagebrush, on the south almost by sagebrush and on the west by encroaching orchards.”

Pomona College

Though Ralph Cornell was a member of the Kappa Delta fraternity, and worked as a masseuse for soccer players to add to his income (for such legends as William Clary, the “man with the million dollar toe,” kicker of the winning field goal at the last game in which Pomona College beat USC) and a waiter at the Claremont Inn, his academic and extracurricular life at Pomona revolved around plants. His first semester, Cornell registered for a course in botany and soon fell under the sway of Biology Professor Charles Fuller Baker. Baker was in Cornell’s words a “man-maker,” who channeled the enthusiasms of his students into the botanical and agricultural fields. “A lot of the men who started with Charles Fuller Baker,” Cornell recalled, “made progress, even national positions in the lines of biology, entomology, horticulture, whatever it might have been.”

Upon meeting him, Baker quickly “decided that maybe [Cornell] was a landscape architect in embryo” and encouraged him along those lines, sending him out to sketch gardens and prompting the young Cornell to collect eight hundred sheets of pressed, dried and mounted sheets of garden plants while working for the professor over the summer. The professor instituted an independent study in landscape architecture for Cornell, though he knew almost nothing about the subject, and instructed him in plant propagation. Baker also organized the Pomona College Journal of Economic Botany, and published some of Cornell’s writing along with that of “more scientific men.”

This introduction would lead Ralph Cornell to a number of botanical and horticultural adventures during his time at Pomona. During his first year, Cornell made some inquiries and
was able to import 1,000 avocado seeds from Mexico at a time when the fruit was just beginning to come to the attention of American horticulturalists. He made a deal with the then-Grounds Supervisor Forest Hutchinson to split the profits and finally sold the avocado saplings for $2200 his senior year, his half of which would prove instrumental in allowing him to attend the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

Blanchard Park (the Wash) in 1902.

Later in his college career, Cornell spent a summer in the Coachella Valley studying date culture after Professor Baker recommended him to George Wharton James, the manager of the Chuckawalla and Palo Verde Irrigation Association and somewhat of an agricultural speculator. During this time, he traveled to Palm Springs, Indio, Thermal, Coachella, and finally down into the Imperial Valley and Yuma, and wrote up a report for James to use in his publicity entitled “Date Culture on the Colorado Desert” in which he described the date industry in the desert as it
stood at that time. Seeing the desert as ripe with promise, he described in another essay entitled “Citrus Culture on the Colorado Desert” how man was “invading, with many phases of horticulture,” the “hitherto forbidding wastes of the desert.” At this early stage, he wrote:

We do not yet know the possibilities of the desert. The lure and the hint of unknown treasure still lingers and still holds secret the myths of time. The early voyagers of the desert have merely located the landmarks and scraped from the surface the grosser accumulations of wealth. It remains for the agricultural explorer of today, to delve deeply into the possibilities that she presents, and to make the winning fight.  

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Cornell was thus a participant in a cultural movement hoping to reclaim the desert for lucrative commercial agriculture, one that had begun with the Spanish, who introduced Moorish water law and North African plants like the date palm, fig tree and alfalfa to the American Southwest, and continued with the Americans after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. While the Navajo, Moquis, Paiutes and Apaches were observed cultivating the desert soil, providing inspiration to the newly-arrived Spanish and Americans, the Westerners envisioned a non-native agriculture based on plants transplanted from North Africa and the Middle East. Cornell’s visits and reports on date culture in the Imperial and Coachella Valleys thus brought him into the world of agriculturalists such as Robert Forbes, Walter Swingle, Bernard Johnson, and Paul Popenoe, who traveled to the bazaars of Algeria and the Persian Gulf to search out date palm offshoots with names like Deglet Noor (date of light), M’awa (like an intestine) and S’ada Aswad (black happiness) for introduction to the deserts of Southern California.  

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In fact, while at college Cornell became fast friends with Paul Popenoe’s brother Wilson, who also attended Pomona College at that time, and whose father owned the West India Gardens in Altadena and worked extensively with avocado and date introductions. Cornell and Wilson Popenoe would often go on trips to Santa Barbara, where they would stay in a hotel on State Street and visit Dr. Francesco Franceschi at his residence on Mission Ridge, an Italian plant
collector who organized the Southern California Acclimatization Association. Another local horticulturalist he remembers visiting in the area was Mr. E. O. Orpet, who Cornell describes as having “brought in many excellent plants from Africa.” While at Pomona, Cornell worked at the West India Gardens, where the Popeneos were busy introducing the fuerte, pueblo and Hass avocados and working to develop better varieties of a number of crops for the nursery trade, including sapotes, feijoas, guavas, Surinam cherries, and macadamias.

Ralph Cornell’s friendship with Wilson Popenoe led him in the summer of 1912 to return to the desert to work for the Popeneos’ West India Date Plantations in Thermal in “glowing vibrant heat sometimes reaching 120 degrees,” where the family was importing date offshoots and seeds from Algiers, Syria and the Persian Gulf in order to establish the first commercial date plantations in the area. He remembers this summer fondly, recollecting:

The things that I remember with pleasure were the things of the desert, - the little animals, the bird life, the vegetation. The deep and dimpled shadows of the mud hills that enclosed the valley were particularly vivid, mornings and evenings. The colors were beyond the power to describe by word of man. The gentle touch of the wind on one’s cheek at night must be felt to be understood as, lying under the stars, one looked beyond the present into the purple blackness of a star-studded infinity. The night sounds, the smell of rain on creosote bush, the dawn, the constant change, the sunset; yes- the dust and the heat; those are things of which the desert is made.

At the same time as he worked with the Popeneos to transform the arid landscape of Thermal into profit by introducing an agricultural system from North Africa, what left the greatest impact on Cornell that summer was the beauty of the plantation’s natural surroundings and its native fauna and flora.

Cornell was not the only Southern Californian to be so affected by the beauty of Southern California’s nature. Englishman Theodore Payne was another. “A great disciple of the outdoors,” Payne had a “great love for California’s native plants and wild flowers.” In 1910, Cornell got a chance to meet this kindred spirit when Professor Charles Baker introduced the two of them.
Cornell would remain friends with Payne intimately thereafter for at least fifty-five years. At the time Payne was primarily selling eucalyptus seed, but he would later steer his nursery toward the production and sale of primarily the native California flora, many of which he saw quietly disappearing as Southern California became more and more developed. Cornell remembers spending “glorious days together” outdoors with Payne, “looking at everything, taking pictures, gathering specimens to identify or to mount, gathering seeds.” The two would later become partners in landscape architecture for almost five years in the beginning of Cornell’s tenure as Pomona College’s landscape architect in the early 1920’s.

Perhaps owing to his relationship with Theodore Payne, Cornell authored an essay in the Pomona College Journal of Economic Botany in 1912 entitled “Wanted: A Genuine Southern California Ground Park,” in which he remarked upon the “abundant wealth of [native] flower and foliage lying on all sides” of Southern Californians “inviting recognition and adoption,” and suggested the design and planting of a native plant garden in the Southern California area. He decried the fact that “it seems to be our general tendency to make parks as artificial as possible,” and described how “a city very often purchases dry hillsides or rugged slopes for park purposes;” no sooner is this done than “an elaborate water system is installed at enormous expense, and plants entirely foreign to such an environment are grotesquely perched where they must serve a life-long sentence of struggle for existence under conditions entirely adverse to their developments.” He noted ironically that, “unable to obtain reliable seeds at home, plant propagators have sent to Europe for seeds of flowers and shrubs growing wild on our own hills.”

So why not use California plant life, already adapted and ready for us in its native environment? What could be more “interesting and educational to the people at large,” Cornell
asked, then a “public park devoted to plants indigenous to our dry and semi-arid lands, and representative of the many forms of plant life that are found along our coast slopes?” Such a park would be “at once unique and individual; … decidedly typical and distinctive of California; … a garden spot of nature, a mecca for birds, a plant paradise; it would be a delight alike to the student, the botanist, the sight-seer and nature lover, each in his own way.”41 While most Southern Californians at this time were striving to make money off of imported plants, both horticultural and agricultural, Cornell here suggested that Southern California’s native flora was worthy of recognition and adoption in the garden landscape.

A final episode of note that would foreshadow and even predict Cornell’s later career occurred in 1912 when he was brought onto Pomona College’s campus planning committee to join noted architect Myron Hunt, faculty member “Chem” Jones and President James Blaisdell. Cornell stated later that he has “felt increasingly… that” it “was a courtesy to me [in order] to fan a little flame of interest and enthusiasm, because at that stage I could have had nothing to contribute,” still being a student.42 Writing that same year about the potential of Southern California’s native plants for landscaping, perhaps Cornell dreamed of creating a “Genuine Southern California Park” on campus, of the sort he described in the essay mentioned above. For “Nature’s wild abandon” was, in his words, “well worthy, though difficult, of imitation.”43

By the time he graduated in 1914, Cornell’s mentor Charles Baker had moved on from Pomona College to accept the post of Dean of Agriculture in the Philippine Islands, where he worked until his death. Others at Pomona during his time included Harold J. Ryan, the one-time agricultural director of Los Angeles County, Buddy Ryan, who spent most of his life as County Horticultural Commissioner in Los Angeles County, and Avery Hot, Johnny Graff and Joe Neuls, all three of whom ended up working for the Bureau of Plant Industry in Washington D.C.
And his friend Wilson Popenoe had dropped out to travel for a year with his brother Paul collecting date palm offshoots in North Africa and the Middle East before working for the United States Bureau of Foreign Plant Introduction. Soon thereafter, he settled in Antigua, Guatemala where he would eventually become the chief agronomist for the United Fruit Company. There, he built and directed the Escuela Agricola Panamericana and continued in Cornell’s words to “prowl the old trails of the Caribbean and of Central America” in search of new agricultural varieties until his death in 1975.

Harvard Graduate School of Design

In 1914, Ralph Cornell enrolled in the Harvard Graduate School of Design paying for his education there with the $1100 he had made propagating avocados with the Pomona’s Grounds Superintendent and a scholarship he earned at the recommendation of Professor Charles Baker. In the three years he spent in Cambridge, he studied with Henry Vincent Hubbard and Bremer Pond, professional landscape architects in Boston who in Cornell’s words were “exceptionally fine men” who “could design, and… reason and rationalize these things as no one else with whom I had experience.” Cornell learnt how to express his ideas in words and in writing through classes on the graphics of drawing and design, and took classes on the history and background of landscape architecture and plant nomenclature and care. He took school trips to nearby gardens on the North Shore of Massachusetts and other formal gardens like the garden of Weld at the Lars Anderson estate, as well as other gardens as far away as New York City and Long Island. And in his third year, he was exposed to the discipline of city planning. This period was essential, for it was at Harvard that Cornell learnt how to express his design ideas accurately, clearly and succinctly in words, writing, and sketches. Finally, in the March of 1917, Ralph Cornell graduated with a Master’s in Landscape Architecture, his education at an end.
Landscaping Years

Upon graduation, Ralph Cornell turned down a job with the landscaping firm of Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and instead got a job in Toronto with a landscape firm by the name of Harries and Hall because it offered ten dollars more salary per month. There, he designed septic tanks until he decided to enlist after the United States entered World War I. He trained at Camp Lewis in Washington State and shipped out to France with the 91st Division.

When he returned to Southern California after the war, he was the only regular, professionally-trained landscape architect in Los Angeles. Before he had even opened his office on July 1st, 1919, Pomona College had offered him an annual retainership payable in monthly installments to develop their landscaping, as President James Blaisdell and George Marston had decided to expand the maintenance of its grounds. During this period, he visited and walked the entire College grounds up to three times a week and began his work designing the college’s landscape.

When Ralph Cornell arrived at Pomona College as its supervising landscape architect in 1919, we might have expected him to favor California native plants adapted to Pomona College’s location in Southern California given his demonstrated love of California native plants and the outdoors. Indeed, in his 1912 essay “Wanted: A Genuine Southern California Park,” he had strongly suggested the use of “native plants already accustomed to the semi-arid conditions of our soil and climate” and complained that “Europe is far in advance of us in the cultivation of plants that grow wild on our dry hillsides, and unnoticed by us evolve, at our very doors, their wholesome lives of purity and beauty.” Finally he had a chance to put his ideas into practice.

His 1922 landscape plan for the Bridges-Sumner patio area, however, featured 19 plant species, only one of which was native to Southern California (a Mountain Mahogany). The
others hailed from New Zealand, the Mediterranean, Australia, Japan, Central Asia, and even one hybrid developed between two Chinese species brought from China to England and hybridized in Italy before being brought to Southern California. Similarly, a list Cornell submitted in December 1925 for replacements and new plantings included notes for plants from all seven continents including the Brazilian Glorybush, the India Hawthorne, the Natal Plum from South Africa, the Mexican Orange Flower, the Japanese Juniper, the Paraguay Nightshade, the South American Coral Tree, the Common Banana and only two California native species, Toyon and the Mountain Mahogany. Several of the species included on his list are now considered serious invasive species, including Chinese silvergrass (*Miscanthus sinensis*), White-marginated nightshade (*Solanum marginatum*), and the Giant Nightshade (*Solanum robustum*). Ralph Cornell’s later landscape designs at sites including Blaisdell and Mudd Halls, Harwood Court and Bridges Hall involved similarly wide-ranging groupings of species from all across the world.

Ralph Cornell was not landscaping with the California native plants whose use he had once advocated; he was not even landscaping with plants from Europe and New England in order to recreate the feeling of an Eastern college. Instead, he was designing mind-boggling creations in which plants from areas as far apart as New Zealand, Central Asia, Europe, Australia, Japan, China, South Africa and Southern California mingled in a single landscape. To understand the gardens Ralph Cornell designed and the plants he chose to create them, we must first understand the original conception of the “college in a garden” idea, Cornell’s own individual philosophy of landscaping, and how both fit into the horticultural and landscaping culture of Southern California at that time.
President James Blaisdell brought Ralph Cornell on as supervising landscape architect for a single reason: to transform Pomona College into a “college in a garden.” In Cornell’s words, Blaisdell thought that “the beauty of the environment” was “terribly important for a youngster going to College.” But President Blaisdell and trustee George Marston knew very little about plants; as Cornell remembers, “they may not have been too clear in their visualization of the outcome [of the ‘college in a garden’ idea].” Thus, Ralph Cornell was free to conceive of the Pomona College garden as he wished, within limits.
View of two women on the front steps of Bridges Hall of Music at Pomona College.

Cornell agreed wholeheartedly with Blaisdell’s belief in the importance of the college environment to the education of its students. “I think that attitudes and background do affect you throughout life,” he responded in a 1970 interview. “Heredity is basic, you are born with or without certain capacities, but environment develops or inhibits those capacities depending upon what it may be… If you’re raised with a culture and surrounded by beauty, then that’s where you’re comfortable. And that’s why this youth business is rather important.”47 We “should live
in beauty and its environment,” he continued. “The environment has to do with the development of [one’s] capacities.”

It is clear that Cornell believed the realization of Pomona as a “college in a garden” required the destruction of native vegetation and its replacement with turf and other carefully selected plant materials. In a 1921 essay written for the Pomona College Alumni Quarterly, “Ten Years of Increasing Verdure,” he explains:

Even ten years ago it could still truthfully be said that Claremont lay in the sagebrush belt… At that time it would not have been fitting for the campus to bloom like a rose when the country all around flowered as the desert. But we quote the oft heard lament that “times have changed” with the added comment that the campus, too, has changed and is making its effort to keep pace with the times. Truly we regret the passing of the old order, so dear in memory and association; but the work that has seemed, to some, like unnecessary destruction of existing plant life, has been sanctioned only after very deliberate thought and consideration for the future constructive development of the college grounds.

Whereas before, “not a tree, not a shrub, not a flower rose to break” the one “expanse of artificial turf” in front of the College’s library, Cornell spoke proudly in his essay of the “increasing verdure” for which he was mostly responsible, designed to “soften the rigid form of architecture” and to “give enframement to the setting.” Central to this vision of a greener Pomona was his plan for Marston Quadrangle, for which George Marston secretly gave $100,000, a “main, central ground-area… planted to green turf… and flanked by strong boundary plantings of trees and shrubs… so as to properly enclose the oval and give it a feeling of unity.” The “thought is that Pomona is to have an aesthetically-developed, free, open, central campus-unit about which the college buildings will be arranged in accord with a definite plan, and in which the students can gather for moot affairs,” he continued. “Other campus units will be developed in accord with their relation to a larger campus plan built about our oval quad.”
Ralph Cornell’s original plan for Marston Quadrangle, 1922.

Cornell’s commitment to a campus plan and “enframement” for the College is understandable, as is his goal of creating functional space for gatherings and ceremonies. But why did Ralph Cornell feel a need for expansive lawns and exotic species from around the world in his design of Pomona College as a “college in a garden?” To answer this question, it is important to understand both Ralph Cornell’s philosophy of landscaping and the context of his work.

Both James Blaisdell and Ralph Cornell agreed that creating a beautiful environment was essential for Pomona College’s educational mission and its success as an institution. Indeed, Cornell saw the goal of the art of landscape architecture, beauty, as a key attribute for healthy
and economically successful communities. “The values of beauty are not figments of imagination,” he wrote in an essay entitled “Civic Beautification,” nor “merely the proclamation of a fanatical individual who harps on aesthetic values.” Instead: “where a community, through accident or foresight, has achieved beauty in any form it has reaped its reward.” Blaisdell certainly thought so: some years after Marston Quadrangle was installed, Cornell recalls, “Dr. Blaisdell told me… that he felt, dollar for dollar, [Marston Quad] was the best investment the college had ever made because it created a beauty spot, it attracted interest, people came out there because it was beautiful.”

In a series of essays on beautification, Ralph Cornell further emphasizes his belief in the importance of environment:

> Not only in such material ways is there value in this quality which we discuss, but also in deeper human ways do values accrue… where a community is well-ordered in its arrangement, neat and attractive in appearance, it inspires its citizenry to finer things and invites only those to enter its portals who are attracted by the true values of life…

> It is an established fact based upon economic principles that civic beautification is a sound investment. It induces civic consciousness and pride among the citizens; lifts the physical and moral tone of the community and attracts the interest and attention of the outside world.

In another essay, this one reprinted from *Los Angeles: Preface to a Master Plan*, he writes:

> With communities, as with individuals, appearance has a definite effect upon self respect, moral tone, pride, and those other things of the spirit that determine outlook upon life. Attractive surroundings invite proper living… Wisely chosen and carefully executed details… contribute untold values to the health, the moral, social, and economic values of the community.

Thus, Ralph Cornell saw order, neatness, attractive appearance and civic beautification as intrinsic elements in the design of Pomona as a “college in a garden.” But why could these goals not have been achieved with native landscaping, particularly since Cornell had entered into a
partnership with native plant lover Theodore Payne in 1921, whose nursery could have provided a steady supply of drought-tolerant native plants?

It is true that almost all of Ralph Cornell’s landscapes included California-native species, including the Nevin’s Barberry, Mountain Mahogany, Catalina cherry, and Toyon. In particular, his two favorite tree species --- the most numerous on Pomona’s campus --- were native to Southern California: the Western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*), “ever a picturesque feature of the Southern Californian landscape,” and the Coast Live Oak (*Quercus agrifolia*), in his words “truly a good citizen in the world of trees,” with “sturdy character, ruggedness and beauty as an
individual.” But his other plantings were uniformly cosmopolitan: in his article “Decorative Settings for Pacific Coast Schools” published in The Nation’s Schools in 1935, he recommended the use of plants from all over the world, including cotoneasters and pyracanthas, strawberry trees, the Chinese photinia, Raphiolepis or Yedo hawthorn, the abelias, some of the buddleias, the elegant camellias, boxwoods, barberries, jasmines, fragrant daphnes, diosma, Erica or heath, eugenias, Chinese holly, both Portugal and English laurel, Roman myrtle, oleander, all of which “thrive under widely differing conditions and can be counted upon for true service” to the campus landscape.

To explain the worldliness of Ralph Cornell’s gardens, we must understand his concept of how plants could contribute to beautification and the larger background of the Southern California horticultural and gardening industry at the time. First of all, though he loved California’s native plant life, to Cornell “plant materials should be studied for their landscape values, first of all, and their horticultural adaptability only as a means to an end… In any institutional planting,” he continued, “the landscape or decorative values are matters of first and last importance, since school grounds are planted primarily to achieve decorative effects.” In landscape architecture, in his eyes, “plants become a means to an end more often than they, themselves are the achievement one seeks.” Thus, whether or not plantings were appropriate or would require high levels of irrigation was in his mind subordinated to the goal of creating “pleasing composition and attractive appearance.”
Add to this the context of the Southern Californian conception of plants during this period. Reminiscent of Cornell’s adventures with avocado, date and citrus horticulture, all crops brought to Southern California came from afar. Historian Douglas Sackman cites the “global appropriation of the variety of nature as means of production” during this period, an appropriation that was by no means restricted to agriculture. Coinciding with the emergence of an American empire overseas, particularly in the Pacific (with the additions of Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines in 1898 and Wake Island and Samoa in 1899), a new “system of capitalism” was inaugurated “whose agents [penetrated] every corner of the globe seeking plants that, as if by bio-alchemical magic, may be turned to gold.” During this period, “America’s leisure class became ever more fascinated with the exotic” and “consumed with… orientalism.” While
some, like Paul and Wilson Popenoe, searched for new agricultural varieties, Cornell and other Southern Californians cultivated landscape plants newly available to them from all four corners of the Earth to tell “garden stories” that said, “Come to California, which is Eden on earth, and you will live happily and healthily ever after.”

The Eden they spoke of was not Southern California as they found it, but one remade---just as Pomona’s campus had “[flowered] as the rose” from ‘nature in the raw,’ in Cornell’s words, residents of Riverside had made “a waste bloom as a garden” under their Governor Perkins, who speaking at the fourth annual Horticultural Fair in Los Angeles in 1881 proclaimed:

> Look at the wonderful array of nature’s gifts spread before us, amplified and enriched by the effort of your Association. A few short years ago, and these valleys, now
emparadised in fruits, cereals and flowers, raised their upturned faces in sullen, uninviting barrenness. Surely the approving smile of heaven is upon us! … The whole world lies before us here. That fig speaks to us of Syria; that luscious peach recalls to us the fertile land of Persia.65

Native plants, and peoples, had no place in the new Los Angeles, as towns, elites, and colleges sought to similarly “emparadise” their land in gardens serving as public displays of American imperialism, wealth, status, and control over nature. Perhaps most emblematic of this last trend was the practice of Luther Burbank, a horticulturalist who worked to hybridize plant species from all over the world to create entirely new varieties of plant life, including a spineless cactus, a white blackberry, and the Russet Burbank potato, today the most widely-cultivated potato in the United States. “We are standing just at the gateway of scientific horticulture,” he wrote, “only having taken a few steps in the measureless field which will stretch out as we advance into the golden sunshine of a more complete knowledge of the forces which are to unfold all the graceful forms of garden beauty, and wealth of fruit and flowers, for the comfort and happiness of Earth’s teeming millions.” Of this unique man, Sackman writes: “Burbank promised to disclose the secrets of nature and give culture infinite power to shape it to match people’s desires… his plants embodied and seemed to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Californians had indeed found a way to reinvent nature and thereby recreate Eden.”66

Pomona’s “college in a garden” was thus conceived in a greater context of Edenic garden-making in Los Angeles during the settlement and growth of Los Angeles, gardens that proclaimed a new, artificial order that “[created] a vision of the proper arrangement of nature” and celebrated the ability of the United States to import landscape plants from around the world.67 Like much of Southern California, it was the “product of people capable of global vision and imperial reach,” one created by artifice and proclaiming a “metanarrative” that “implied the domination of civilization over nature.”68 In the context of Ralph Cornell’s
philosophy of landscaping, the ability to combine plantings from all around the world on Pomona’s campus was not inappropriate but merely a means to create beauty. And those plants were essential, in his eyes. “Sometimes we resent it,” he said in 1970. But “that’s what landscape, environmental planning does. It considers everything, even though the landscape architect doesn’t design the building; it considers the total picture and ideally it develops the circulation pattern, the land use determination, the location of these things, which it doesn’t design in detail but which go into the composite.”69 The “campus of today… is still in the formation period of growth,” he wrote in a 1937 article entitled “Pomona College and its Golden Anniversary.” With its “acres of green lawn, its towering trees and its planned arrangement, it becomes a far cry from the trail-dotted wastes that once were Claremont.”70

Pearson’s Hall, Pomona College.
Later Life and Writing

Later in his life, as Southern California became more developed, Ralph Cornell’s turned again to his interest in native plants and increasingly focused on the importance of conservation. He was appalled at the extent to which open space was giving way to intense development: “where subdivision and industry reign supreme” he wrote in 1962, “they devour everything with any semblance of availability and weld our communities into solid masses of tightly-compacted human beings… It may be necessary consciously to conserve open space in the ever-growing urban complex if such space is to be available at all.” 71

In 1970, he wrote in an essay in Landscape Architecture, “The garden idea may have taken root and begun its long, slow climb from the fog of antiquity to the smog of modernity.” 72 At the same time as the art of landscape architecture had matured, the environment of the modern world had begun to deteriorate, Cornell saw. “To say that no natural landscape is left in America today may sound extreme,” he writes in a different work, “and yet I think that the statement can be made with quite a modicum of truth when one takes into account the many scars and inroads that man has made on the face of the globe. Everywhere one goes are roads and trails and firebrakes… something to suggest the activities of man and to rob the landscape of those primitive qualities that make it strictly natural.” 73

Perhaps most telling of the transformation in Ralph Cornell’s thought is a short essay he wrote entitled “Gazing into the Future.” In it, he strove to scry the future of master planning and landscape architecture, disciplines in his mind reliant upon the “guessing upon futures in growth and occupation, of community activities and requirements.” Though keeping ahead of human and environmental growth was in his mind “an almost impossible task,” he stated that “if we
comprehend a bit of how we arrived at present conditions, it will be easier to avoid blunders and repetition of the same mistakes over and over again.”

“North America has been known to modern civilization for less than 500 years,” he wrote. “During that time man has worked tirelessly and effectively to destroy his environment, to change the ecology of the space in which he lives, to consume and otherwise eliminate irreplacable natural resources, while he polluted air and soil and water to make his own existence precarious at best.” The “devastation of nature and open space has raced through our land as once did the prairie and forest fires that took all before them. The holocaust is upon us.”
Looking back as a lifelong landscape architect at least partially responsible for some of these changes --- being part of a greater landscaping movement responsible for bringing countless destructive invasive species to Southern California, displacing the native ecology of the area, and replumbing the state at great cost to the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and the Colorado River ecosystems --- he asked himself, and others: “Where do we go from here? What happens to the landscape architect; to his profession? What can he do about it?” Continuing, he identified himself and other landscape architects as being partly responsible for these problems and potentially able to solve them:

As environmental and space planners, the landscape architects are very much interested in and close to the problem. Needless to say they already are much involved in protecting what little is left of nature’s bounty and in developing proper use capacities of land and space to their highest degrees of efficiency and aesthetic values. Instead of living at the tail end of the horse era, we now occupy seats at the front end of the space rocket. When the next rocket blasts off we had better be sitting in the proper place, with our seat belts firmly buckled.

His later writings and involvements suggest his conception of how landscape architects could help to “[protect] what little is left of nature’s bounty” and develop “proper use capacities of land and space to [the] highest degrees of efficiency.” In 1951, he became associated with Santa Barbara Botanic Garden --- an institution dedicated to research, education, and the conservation and display of California native plants --- until his death in 1972. And in 1961, Cornell wrote an essay in *Landscape Architecture* entitled “Desert Gardens,” reinforcing his shift in perspective and illustrating his openness to new styles of gardening more in touch with local conditions. “Way out West in the land of cactus,” he wrote, “the settlers are shedding their dude thinking and getting down to the bare facts of desert gardening.” All landscape design which has “achieved sufficient quality and character to establish itself as a well-conceived style,” he
continued, “has done so by recognizing the controls of topography, climate and the society under which it matured.”

Maybe thinking back to his plans to bring vast lawns of green to Pomona in the 1920’s, he wrote: “The greater part of the United States takes grass for granted. It is assumed to be a symbol which bespeaks good design in garden, park, and rural developments. Without it, one just hasn’t, so to speak, arrived.” Though “grass may be very logical in New England, Kentucky, or northern Europe,” Cornell mused, “its Creator never intended that it should be planted on the fringes of desert desolation.” Perhaps it would be best to “plant no grass at all” in those regions, he concluded.

An earlier book written in 1937, *Conspicuous California Plants*, builds upon Cornell’s growing support for more appropriate, native landscaping and shows his growing commitment to conservation even decades earlier. All around he saw the destruction of California’s flora:

The great natural parks of California live oaks are disappearing before the plow and the subdivider; many of them long since became but a memory. The onetime poppy fields and other wildflowers of the San Fernando Valley and similar districts will never be seen again. Tremendous sections of desert have been robbed of their heritage and bent to the will of man that he might have more farms… Our typical scenery is in greater danger of annihilation than is our unusual scenery.

While man in his eyes was “probably… the most destructive of all animals ever to roam the surface of the earth,” he pointed out “instances in which man has preserved for his own use and for posterity those things which otherwise might have perished.” There are “many plants in our gardens today, the origin and original habitat of which have been entirely lost to our records; plants that have no exact counterpart in nature and cannot be found in a natural state even in modern form… Man has been [their] protecting angel.” These many garden plants --- “protected and developed until their origins recede into obscurity, their ancestry lost in the mazes of antiquity” --- persisted solely because “man is a conservationist.”
Finally, in the concluding chapter of his book, entitled “Native Plants in the Garden,” he makes his case for the use of California natives in landscape architecture. “It is but a short step from an interest in the wide open spaces, and conservation of plants that grow thereon, to an interest in transplanting these native things into the garden.”\textsuperscript{82} As in “Wanted: A Genuine Southern California Park,” he highlighted California’s “prodigious wealth in… plant varieties,” but described their greatly increased availability since that time. “There is now scarcely a nursery within the state that does not grow some native plants,” he wrote. “More than five hundred varieties of native seeds are listed in catalogues and offered to the public at reasonable prices… so there is no longer excuse for those of us who want native plants in our gardens and do not have them.”\textsuperscript{83}

In this chapter, we can discern perhaps why Cornell did not use native plants more widely in his design of Pomona’s landscaping. “The arid conditions of our California climate, through long centuries of evolution and adaptation, have forced her plants into forms and habits of life best suited to thrive under those conditions, with the result that many of them have acquired very ungarden-like attributes.” While many of the native varieties --- including the “saucy and attractive monkey flowers,” the “various tree lupines,” the penstemons, “native to our hills and canyons,” and the varieties of Ceanothus of striking beauty that nonetheless “tend to defoliate in summer and look sadly out of tune with the richness one expects of a garden” --- were thus not perfectly adapted to his garden aesthetic, Cornell does describe another group of natives that “offer us the highest landscape values… the most satisfying, in landscape and garden use.” In “one or two instances,” he wrote, “I have designed in-town gardens where these shrubs predominated and were used to gain garden effects of massing, screening and background in ways that have been entirely satisfactory. They have withstood the test of years and seem to
compare well with shrubbery of the more common garden varieties.” \(^84\) Though Cornell would remain to the last a landscape architect who believed that “only those plants be used that will contribute to the effect desired,” through his experimentation he had found native species to equal their exotic counterparts. In the concluding two sentences of the chapter we can sense Cornell’s true feelings towards California’s flora, and their potential future use in gardening:

I do hope… that I may have piqued the curiosity of some, aroused the interest of others, and increased the enthusiasm of all who love the plant friends of our California landscapes. The flame of enthusiasm, once kindled, will carry one far along the road to happiness, as he bears aloft the torch of his own illumination. \(^85\)
“Gardening as a cultural activity, matters deeply, not only to the look of our landscape, but also to the wisdom of our thinking about the environment.”
- Michael Pollan, “Beyond Wilderness and Lawn”

**Pomona College and the Garden of the Future**

Pomona’s “College in a Garden” was thus produced by a landscape architect --- Ralph Cornell --- on one hand committed to the aesthetic notions of beauty of his time and on the other to the conservation of the California flora he loved. It was a hybrid of two garden ethics: the first, an eclectic approach to garden design made possible only by the “lavish use of imported water” and the importation of a “vast range of plants from the temperate, subtropical, and tropical regions of the world;” the second, one appreciative of the beauty of Southern California’s native flora and desiring to use native plant species in the garden. 

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Cornell’s conception of Pomona as a “college in a garden” has endowed the institution with a beautiful though complicated landscape. As campus designer Richard Dober wrote in his 1978 draft of the Pomona College Centennial Plan:

Pomona possesses an extraordinarily beautiful landscape, a realization of the founder’s dream of “a college in a garden.” In the central campus area, ground covers, trees and shrubs display, in abundant variety, the highest forms of ornamental horticulture — an art rarer than architecture. The Pomona landscape encloses and frames smaller open spaces; defines views and vistas into and from the campus; complements adjacent architecture; gives color and texture to the visual surrounds; marks the passing seasons; muffles street noise and filters the air. The landscape as a whole melds campus, community and adjacent colleges into a design entity that for visitor and resident is commodious, spacious and delightful.87

However, Dober failed to pick up on the complexity of that landscape and its cultural roots. On one hand, a dominant element in Ralph Cornell’s landscapes were the native oaks and sycamores, centerpieces of Marston Quadrangle, Stover Walk, and the Wash (which he worked to preserve); on the other, he covered much of the campus with grass and a vast array of exotic trees and shrubs, broken up only occasionally with the token native Toyon or Coffeeberry.

This latter landscaping aesthetic, though colorful, in some sense has robbed Pomona of its original identity as a “sagebrush college,” and its students of a closer connection to nature. When Cornell began clearing the native flora he found on campus in 1919, we can imagine there were some protests—“oft-heard laments that ‘times [had] changed’” as he mentions in his 1921 “Ten Years of Increasing Verdure,” and a dislike of what seemed like “unnecessary destruction of existing plant life.”88

But the magnitude of the loss can best be seen in Astronomy Professor Frank Brackett’s descriptions of the early Pomona College campus:

Another influence upon the College, intangible but very real, was that of the “wild” itself, the aromatic tang of sagebrush and greasewood, the wind-borne scent, almost intoxicating, of mountain lilac and other wild flowers, the hum of bees gathering honey from sagebrush and orange, the song of the meadow lark, the “to-bac-co” of the quail; underfoot the rich carpet of pentstemon, baby-blue-eyes, bluebells, red and yellow and purple violets, and the beautiful cyclamen on the slopes of Indian Hill, if you knew just
where to look for them; acres and acres of golden California poppies, or eschscholtzia. Farther afield were the gorgeous matilija poppies and the princely plumes of yucca on the foothill slopes. Back of it all to the north and east and south was the vista of the mountains—San Antonio, San Bernardino, and San Jacinto, and the lesser ranges from the foothills to the lofty skyline so well known and loved.

Always the desert seemed to be pushing in upon us; always its life and beauty were beckoning us out to enjoy it, urging us still farther afield. It gets into the blood and soul, and once there it is never lost.

Cyrus Baldwin, one of the early Presidents of the College, was another lover of the nature surrounding Pomona. “For him,” Brackett recalls, “the mountains and canyons of California had a strong appeal.” His “many hikes up into the canyons were taken not only because of his interest in water power, but because of his keen delight in the beauties of the canyon, in the climbing of the mountains, and in the tonic of the cool, pine-scented air that blows down the canyons and over the heights.”

Today, Pomona College has the means at its disposal to return to its campus the Southern Californian nature so influential in its early years. While the Southern Californian “tradition of plant introduction” has “continued to the present decade, and the technologies for supplying unseasonal water have become ever more sophisticated, making it possible for Californians to create virtually any kind of garden imaginable,” others have picked up on Ralph Cornell’s desire to use “native and drought-tolerant plants… to create regionally appropriate gardens.” Groups advocating the use of California native plants include the Theodore Payne Foundation, the California Native Plant Society, and others. Claremont is now the home to Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, the largest of its kind dedicated exclusively to California’s native plants, and featuring 70,000 native Californian plants of some 2,000 native species, hybrids and cultivars. The town is also the working home of two of the most knowledgeable native landscaping experts in Southern California, Bob Perry and Bart O’Brien. And Pomona College’s Grounds Department now has available hundreds of native plants from local nursery El Nativo, “Growers
of Quality Plants for the California Landscape.” Whereas at the beginning of his landscaping career Cornell found it hard even to find native plants for garden uses, knowledge about native gardening has increased many-fold and Southern Californians today have an extensive array of garden-friendly native hybrids at their disposal.

In the past few years, native plants have increasingly found a place on Pomona’s campus and in its landscaping projects as the campus becomes more committed to sustainability and water conservation. The landscaping of the Peter W. Stanley Academic Quadrangle, dedicated in 2007, involved a reduction of 5,000 square feet of turf and the use of native plants like the California lilac (Ceanothus) in a formal setting. And the new dorms, Sontag Hall and Building B, feature almost exclusively native and drought-tolerant landscaping. This newfound commitment to the use of native plants in landscaping is a key strategy in the Pomona’s efforts to conserve water, since approximately 60 % of the College’s overall water usage is for irrigation.

What would Ralph Cornell think of these developments? Most likely, he would have supported them wholeheartedly. While he believed that “good design” was “not a matter of passing fashion,” but “fundamental” and “basic,” he also acknowledged that “the stages through which we go in this modern idea, much of that is no more than passing fancy. It’s like the things we wear… in garden design, too, that happens.”

Given his love of native plants and consistent use of those species he considered most adapted to the garden throughout his tenure as Pomona’s supervising landscape architect, and greater commitment to conservation as he grew older, it seems natural that he would have turned increasingly towards their use in landscaping at Pomona College if he were still alive today.
The use of native landscape plants has the potential not only to help Pomona achieve its sustainability goals but also to help the College create a more convincing sense of place. Whereas Pomona College’s lawns and exotic landscaping first allowed it to stand out from the surrounding chaparral, they now render it homogenous with the dominant Southern California garden and yard aesthetic, one completely at odds with its sustainability goals. Indeed, it is the College’s native Californian plants that make it most distinctive, including the Coast Live Oaks of Stover Walk and the Western Sycamores of Marston Quadrangle (both of which were present at the site of the College before the arrival of its founders).

In Richard Dober’s words, “A sense of place is first the sum of all those environmental characteristics that distinguish a part from the whole,” implying “physical qualities which allow one to separate the fresh from the stale, the sweet from the sour, protecting, enhancing,
cultivating amenity and ambience, stimulating variety, banishing monotony, creating tranquility from raucous insistence.”

It includes:

- Strongly felt values, meanings and symbols
- The valued qualities of a place
- The set of place meanings that are actively and continuously constructed and reconstructed within individual minds, shared cultures, and social practices; and
- The awareness of the cultural, historical, and spatial context within which meanings, values, and social interactions are formed.

If the Pomona College landscape reflects our values and can thus be considered “discourse materialized,” then it is essential that Pomona College’s landscape reflect its commitment to water conservation and ecologically-appropriate design. More and more, landscape architects are finding that it is possible to design spaces for human use that also serve as habitat for local species. Bolstering the Wash as an ecological resource and planting native species in the place of unused turf provides an opportunity to reduce water usage, restore the local ecology, and evoke Pomona’s past as a “sagebrush college,” yielding a unique sense of place and identity more real and appropriate than that resulting from the wide use of turf and exotic species from across the globe.

**A Learning Landscape**

Ralph Cornell and President Blaisdell envisioned Pomona’s “college in a garden” as a beautiful backdrop for the college education, and as a living, 3-dimensional advertisement for the institution. But perhaps the Pomona College landscape of the future will not only provide a beautiful setting for learning, but itself teach.

A key way in which the Pomona College landscape could itself become an instrument of education is by the inclusion of students in the process by which it is created. Changing the
campus from a “dominated --- and hence passively experienced --- space” that “the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” to one crafted by those who dwell within it would allow “the superimposition of the works of the succeeding generations upon earlier achievements” that Thomas Sharp describes as a key precursor to generating a sense of place, and allow “each generation… to rework the definitions of the old symbols which it inherits from the generation before” and “reformulate the old concepts in terms of its own age,” in the words of city planner Edmund Bacon.96

Consider geographer Clarissa Kimber’s definition of garden. “Gardens are created and cultivated by the people who dwell in them,” she writes. Quoting Heidegger: “We attain to dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building.” The “needs of human dwelling are achieved when they are allowed to arise spontaneously out of the requirements and concerns of particular people and landscapes. The beauty of a garden is that it may bring a person as close to this balance, unity, and responsiveness as a human ever comes.” The vernacular garden, in her words, is “one from which the owner derives most pleasure by actually working in it and making changes in it, rather than from looking at it or passing through it.” Any “place in which people garden… is a place of social significance.”97

Though no student has the time or experience to maintain the overall design of Pomona College’s landscape, a model of the campus as something designed solely by an overseeing landscape architect has its faults as well. A new model in which students and faculty --- those who dwell in the campus landscape --- were included in landscape design could result in more vibrant, sustainable spaces and help generate “ecological literacy” and a “stewardship of place” among the members of the Pomona College community. Pomona student Yamini Bala in 1997 called for Pomona and the other Claremont colleges to “[rethink their] relationship between
landscape and learning” in an essay entitled “Learning Landscapes: A Century of Environmental Transformation in Claremont, California.” We “require a citizenship of place,” she wrote, “governed by responsible stewards who inhabit landscapes as wards, keepers, as guardians.”

One place where this has begun is the Pomona College Organic Farm, a 2.5-acre student-run farm in a southern portion of the Wash, where “students have created a large garden of subtropical, desert and traditional fruit trees, perennial shrubs, berries, herbs, flowers and annual vegetables.” Divided into the East Farm, used for academic projects, and the West Farm, where any student can obtain a plot to grow crop plants, the area has in the words of its website “become a place of community, a place of learning, and a place of exploration beyond the

Pomona College Organic Farm.99
conventional university classroom.” Somewhat limited by the College’s hammer-throw field which divides the two areas, the Organic Farm has the potential to become an even larger and more valuable space available for cultivation in which students and faculty could experiment with edible plantings --- an activity in keeping with Pomona’s namesake, the Roman goddess of fruitful abundance, and the work of past students like Wilson Popenoe, a man intimately involved with the origins of Southern California’s avocado and date agriculture.

A 1700 painting of the goddess Pomona by painter Nicholas Fouche.

Another example of how students are becoming shapers of the Pomona College landscape is the newly-founded Ralph Cornell Society of Native Landscapers. Started in December 2010, the club has designed and landscaped native plant gardens at Brackett
Observatory and in two planters outside of Frary Dining Hall with the invaluable help of Kevin Quanstrom and Ronald Nemo of Grounds. By the end of the semester, the group will have landscaped a third area between Clark V and Clark III Dormitories, and plans to landscape two more areas next fall, one north of Raines Gymnasium and one south of Clark V Dormitory.

Through my involvement with the newly-founded Ralph Cornell Society, I will in coming years (as long as the garden remains) feel a visceral connection to the campus by virtue of having selected native plant species and planted with my own hands something that has taken root at Pomona. The work of the club, if it is sustained, has the ability to literally root Pomona students in their landscape and the College itself to its ecosystem, a victory for sustainability (through lessened water use) and native ecology (through the value these plants have for local animals). Through its plantings, the club transforms areas of Pomona’s landscape that have slipped through the cracks of the greater landscaping scheme, cheaply redesigning them with California plants well-adapted to our climate and locale. Such work is both educational and empowering, and has the potential to create at Pomona College the “citizenship of place” Yamini Bala called for in her 1997 essay, one “governed by responsible stewards who inhabit landscapes as wards, keepers, [and] guardians” instead of “residents” who “possess no allegiance to place.”

Pomona’s “college in a garden” was born when President Blaisdell decided to include Ralph Cornell in his campus planning committee. Perhaps the best way to ensure the continuation of this idea is to build upon the recent efforts of students and faculty to grow food and design native plant gardens on campus --- cultivating a “college of gardeners” --- and to continue including members of the Pomona College community in decisions affecting its greater landscape.
35 Cornell, Ralph D. Biographical Info.
36 Cornell, Ralph D. Oral History pg. 46.
37 Cornell, Ralph D. Biographical Info.
38 Oral History Pgs. 47, 134.
39 Oral History Pg. 133.
42 Oral History Pg. 33.
44 Cornell, Ralph. Southern California Landscape Architect. Pg. 11.
46 Oral History Pg. 63.
47 Oral History pg. 51.
48 Oral History pg. 16.
52 Cornell, Ralph D. “Civic Beautification: Is it a Sound Investment? Experience answers ‘Yes.’” Pg. 3.
53 Oral History Pg 63.
54 Cornell, Ralph D. “Civic Beautification: Is it a Sound Investment? Experience answers ‘Yes.’”
56 From Theodore Payne in his Own Words.
57 Wanted: A Genuine Southern California Park. Pg. 303; Conspicuous California Plants, Pg. 28.
59 Cornell, Ralph D. “Decorative Settings for Pacific Coast Schools.” Pg. 44, 43.
60 Cornell, Ralph D. “Practical Application of Art Appreciation.” Speech to California State Polytechnic College, Kellogg-Voorhies Campus, 10-30-1959. pg. 2.
61 Sackman Pg. 246
62 Sackman Pg. 247.
63 Sackman Pg. 256.
64 Sackman Pg. 251.
65 Sackman Pg. 252.
66 Sackman Pg. 259.


Cornell, Ralph D. “Gazing into the Future,” nd, Cornell Coll. #1411, Box #38, Pg. 1.


Cornell, Ralph D. “Gazing into the Future,” nd, Cornell Coll. #1411, Box #38, Pg. 2, italics added.

Cornell, Ralph D. “Gazing into the Future,” Pg. 3.


Conspicuous California Plants, Pg. 164.

Conspicuous California Plants, Pg. 168.

Conspicuous California Plants, Pg. 169.

Conspicuous California Plants, Pgs. 170-173.

Conspicuous California Plants, Pgs. 168.


Brackett, Pgs. 20-21.

Brackett, Pg. 49.

Streatfield, David C. Pg. 11.

Oral History Pg. 16.


100 http://organicfarm.pomona.edu/new_page_11.htm.
102 Bala, Yamini. Pg 23.