Standing in the middle of Glen Ellen’s Quarryhill Botanical Gardens feels otherworldly, that’s because in large part, it is. Instead of California live oak, a 40-foot-tall Paulownia fortunei, or dragon tree, gives shade to passersby. An English walnut, the curiously named native of the Himalayas, provides the perfect trunk for woodpeckers to peck to their hearts’ content. A magnolia hints at the familiar, but its large red flowers and enormous, prehistoric looking leaves immediately indicate that this is Magnolia grandis, an extremely endangered plant from China. Many visitors will not realize how rare it is to see the flowers, which only bloom outside of China on the two trees at Quarryhill.

Though it’s nestled in the Wine Country between Santa Rosa and Sonoma, the 26-acre preserve is full of nearly 2,000 varieties of rare and endangered Asian plants, most of which are unrecognizable to native Californians. What’s more, all of the 25,000 trees, shrubs, flowers and bushes were planted from seeds collected by hand in remote areas of China and Southeast Asia by the nonprofit’s executive director and Sonoma State University alumnus Bill McNamara.
This year, McNamara became one of only seven people in the world to receive the "triple crown" of horticulture awards. He had already received the Scott Medal in 2010 from the Scott Arboretum at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, given to those who have made "an outstanding national contribution to the science and art of gardening." In February, he was honored with the Veitch Memorial Medal from the Royal Horticultural Society after being nominated by "The Queen's Botanist," Steve Blackmore.

And in June, McNamara capped off the extraordinary achievement by receiving the American Horticultural Society's highest honor, the Liberty Hyde Bailey Award, for his significant lifetime contributions to horticulture at a ceremony in Alexandria, Virginia.

Not bad for a guy who started his career just looking to make a living to support his family.

**Humble Beginnings**

McNamara's work includes annual expeditions to jungles, forests and saving character the Lorax.

But he never set out to save the world's endangered plants. The job just sort of grew on him.

"At my first job out of high school I worked for the California Division of Forestry in the Santa Cruz Mountains," recalls McNamara, sitting in his office at an antique desk under a wall-size map of China. "When there was time, my foreman would walk me around and show me the conifers. I remember saying to him they all look the same, they all look like Christmas trees. And he said, 'No, look at this one — it's different than this one. Look at the needles here, look at the cone here, they're all different.' It took me a few weeks, but I got hooked and I wanted to know how they were all different. So it became a hobby of mine to try and learn as much as I could."

He earned a degree in English from UC Berkeley in 1975, and found work after college in the plant business. "I quickly realized I was going to starve to death working at a nursery so I started a landscape contracting business because I wanted to work with plants and I wanted to be outside," he says. "I did that for about 16 years. While I was doing that I met the woman starting this project. One thing led to another and that's how I was able to do it."

That woman was Jane Davenport Jansen, who had purchased 20 acres of land in Glen Ellen for vineyards in 1988.

McNamara met her in 1987, the same year she started a garden on 20 acres of hillside above the vineyard. It was also about the same time that McNamara made his first expedition to collect seeds in Asia. The following year the nursery was established at Quarryhill, and McNamara took the first of what would be many expeditions with experts from the renowned Kew Gardens in London. Planting began at Quarryhill in 1990, and in May this year the nonprofit celebrated its 30th anniversary.
Never Stop Learning

Though he is widely recognized as an expert in horticulture, McNamara had little formal education on the subject until attending Sonoma State University in the early 2000s. "I always thought I'd go back and get graduate degrees but didn't have the time or money," he says. The desire to further his education never left, however, and in 2005 he graduated from Sonoma State with a master's in conservation biology. Though the University does not have a formal conservation biology program, McNamara was able to work with advisors to create his own field of study through the Hutchins School's unique Interdisciplinary Studies Program.

When he enrolled at Sonoma State, McNamara was already working as director at Quarryhill and had taken several expeditions to Asia. "It was unusual being older than most of the professors," says McNamara, who graduated at age 55.

"I felt the need to have more education," he says. "I do the work of a botanist at Quarryhill but until then I had never taken a course in horticulture or botany or anything like that."

His thesis on conservation bias confirmed that what was true in the animal kingdom extended to plants as well — humans focus conservation efforts on how cute, cuddly, beautiful or otherwise pleasing to our sensibilities a species may be. McNamara refers to it as the "panda phenomenon."

"You can raise money for pandas because they're cute, but for an endangered lizard? It's harder to raise money for them because they're not cute," he says. "I had been thinking about it with plants because that's what we had been working with at Quarryhill. The main group being focused on were highly ornamental because that's what people know."

There are many endangered species that deserve conservation just as much as anything else. Take for example Acer pentaphyllum, a rare maple whose five-lobed leaves resemble cannabis more than they do a traditional maple leaf. The plant, native to Southwestern Szechuan province in the middle of China, is so critically endangered in the wild that botanists think it may go extinct within the next decade. Quarryhill has taken on the task of being the only institution in the world dedicated to saving this rare maple tree and its leaf is now emblazoned in the non-profit's logo.

As the story goes, since its 1929 initial introduction, the only place botanists had been able to collect its seeds was from a few plants growing at the Strybing Arboretum in San Francisco. McNamara made it his...
mission to find them in the wild, and after several expeditions he finally found a group of seven trees growing in China. He received funding from National Geographic to go back and do more field research on the trees, and has returned several times since in his quest to save the species.

Since first rediscovering Acer pentaphyllum, Quarryhill has planted over 200 of the trees on its property in hopes of repatriating them back to their native habitat. McNama estimates there are more now at Quarryhill than exist in the wild, due in part to the construction of dams in its native habitat.

**Saving from Extinction**

"It's very difficult to state emphatically that a plant or animal is extinct because even though humans have gone almost everywhere in the world they occasionally find a plant or animal that has not been seen in 30 or 40 years," says McNama.

For example, the coelacanth, a fish discovered in the wild in the 1930s, and animals in the next 100 years," McNama says, matter-of-factly.

**Hidden Gem**

On a beautiful Friday morning in late May the garden is quiet, with only a few people strolling its paths. Some of the only people we see on our tour are two German tourists who wave and say hello with thick accents. "Sometimes we say it's better known internationally than it is locally," says McNama. "Most people, when they come here for the first time, they say 'I'm stunned, I had no idea a place like this even existed, let alone in the Sonoma Valley.'"

"It's a hidden gem for sure," says Kathleen Aspens. She has an annual...
membership to Quarryhill and collects essences from the garden’s flowers to make therapeutic oils. “It’s just such a magical place,” she says. “I’ve been going each week for almost 10 years now, and every time I go I see something I’ve never seen before. The depth and richness of the collection is just mind-blowing. Quarryhill is a little bit of a Noah’s Ark of plant diversity.”

Wise Guy

McNamara can name each of the 2,000 plants living at Quarryhill by sight, and does so with the point of a finger. When astonished guests point out how incredible that is, he demurs modestly with a dry sense of humor. “I could be faking it,” he suggests. The plants at Quarryhill all have ID tags, though, so it’s doubtful he would get away with the charade for long.

“We have documentation on where these came from, so we get requests weekly from researchers around the world asking for leaf samples, petal samples and the collection data,” says McNamara. In general, he doesn’t collect seeds from the plants on the property because they could have become hybridized. “First generation is still wild, second generation could be a hybrid, and researchers are not interested in that.”

The imported plants grow very well at Quarryhill, and the nonprofit is conscientious about keeping its non-native species from escaping the garden. “We try to monitor the collection and if we see something that’s too aggressive, we’ll eradicate it,” says McNamara. “It’s very hard for most of these plants to survive in California without the irrigation here because of the summer drought we have.”

McNamara takes personal pride in the garden, telling stories about where the seeds for a particular tree were collected.

He stops under a 25-foot, broad-leafed Idesia polycarpa tree with clusters of black and orange berries. “I was in a big tree, filling a plastic bag full of seeds on the island of Yakushima in Japan,” McNamara begins. Looking up at the dense, leafy canopy over our heads, it was easy to visualize the scene. “I opened my day pack and ate lunch while sitting in the tree. When I got out of the tree, all these monkeys leaped into it and started pulling off the fruit and smelling it and throwing it to the ground. They’d been watching me wondering what the hell I was doing. So I really experienced monkey see, monkey do.”

Here’s hoping his dedication to plant conservation will also inspire a little human see, human do.

Visitors are welcome to picnic in designated areas at Quarryhill Botanical Garden and self-guided and docent-led tours are available. The Garden is open seven days a week, 9 a.m. - 4 p.m., $8-$12 (kids under 12 admitted free). More information is available at Quarryhillbg.org.