

# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

## Water-wise jewel

### Cactus and succulent garden named after longtime collector

By Mary James  
HOMESCAPE EDITOR

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Warren Buckner remembers very clearly the first two succulents he bought.

"It was in the 1940s," he said. "I paid 19 cents at Sears for a *Mammillaria hahniana*. It had a crown of pink flowers. And I paid 10 cents for a *Euphorbia obesa*, which was called Eisenhower's Golf Balls then. Growers were trying to get around the Latin names so people would buy these plants."

Then a newcomer to San Diego, the youthful engineer was already a devoted naturalist, inspired by a childhood in St. Louis on the family farm and college classes with renowned Missouri botanist Julian Steyermark. But those two prickly purchases introduced him to plants that still intrigue him today.

"I love the diversity of shape and color," he says quietly. "And here's the good part, they thrive on neglect. If you try to take too good care of them, you kill them."

Now 86, Buckner has been honored with a life membership in the San Diego Cactus and Succulent Society, a group he joined decades ago and served as president.



DAN TREVAN / Union-Tribune

Warren Buckner (right) in the refurbished cactus and succulent garden designed by his son Michael (left). The garden at the Water Conservation Garden on the Cuyamaca College campus was named in honor of the elder Buckner earlier this week.

Earlier this week at the Water Conservation Garden at Cuyamaca College, more than 100 dignitaries, friends and family members, including Buckner's wife Virginia, gathered for another celebration: the opening of the H. Warren Buckner Cactus and Succulent Garden there.

Among the well-wishers was his son, Michael Buckner, owner of The Plant Man in Old Town and designer of the stylish jewel-of-a-garden that bears his father's name.

As she prepared for the dedication ceremonies, Water Conservation Garden Executive Director Marty Eberhardt praised the elder Buckner for his support of the 4-½-acre nonprofit garden established six years ago on the El Cajon campus.

"Warren was on the Helix Water District board at the time and was instrumental in getting the whole garden established. He also served as our board president for six years," she said. "I'm from Tucson and I love cacti. It was great for me to find a cactus guy like Warren involved with this garden."

Conversations with Warren and Michael last December "started the wheels churning" and led to the renovation and naming of the succulent and cactus garden, Eberhardt said.

"The old succulent garden we had wasn't the best to inspire people to grow water-wise plants – and that's our mission," she said of the improvements, the first of several planned around the garden in the future. She estimates that donated plants, materials and labor for the project topped \$100,000.

Located on both sides of a path about 100 yards north of the garden's main entrance, the Buckner garden is an undulating landscape of rocky arroyos, silvery deadwood and dramatic cactuses



DAN TREVAN / Union-Tribune  
Michael Buckner, shown here working on the garden makeover, designed plantings around rocky arroyos, or dry streambeds, common in desert landscapes.



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Among the diverse plants are new Thai hybrids of the popular crown of thorns (*Euphorbia milii*).

and succulents that range from the latest hybrids to specimens more than 60 years old. The lavender-gray boulders donated by KRC Rock complement the exotic silver, blue and inky greens of the plants and echo purple picnic benches nearby.

A plaque above a mosaic by San Diego artist Patricia Kaszas of a desert landscape announces the new garden. A rusted horseshoe tucked among the plants is a trademark of Michael Buckner, known for his quirky display gardens at the San Diego County Fair.

Thanks to donations from the Buckners and three North County wholesalers, Western Cactus Enterprises, The Good Earth Inc., and C&J Cactus Nursery, "there's a real diversity of plant material, with lots of color and texture," Eberhardt said. "There will be flowers at different times of the year. We're expecting a peak bloom this year around Christmas."

Days before the dedication, as he watched his son wrestle rocks and thorny cactuses into the ground, Warren Buckner couldn't resist pointing out notable plants.

"That huge golden barrel cactus – it was donated by the owner of Good Earth nursery. His son planted it 25 or 30 years ago. That son died tragically in an accident and the family wanted it in the garden as a commemoration," he said.

"That tall elephant-foot palm must be 60 years old," chimed in Michael, who is also a life member and past president of the local Cactus and Succulent Society. "It was in my nursery when it was in Bazaar del Mundo as a showpiece. We bought it in 1945 as a one-gallon plant."

Blooming crowns of thorns (*Euphorbia milii*) with silver-dollar-sized flowers are the work of hybridizers in Thailand, Warren continued. "That *Cochemiea poselgeri* is from Baja. It's very rare now."

For years, Warren Buckner, sometimes with one of his four sons in tow, regularly trekked through Baja, collecting seeds and admiring its otherworldly landscape. Today he has a couple hundred tropical cactuses (*Rhipsalis*) growing in baskets round his Lemon Grove home.

While pursuing his plant hobby, raising a family and working 33 years at General Dynamics, Buckner also was active in civic affairs. He served 20 years on the Lemon Grove school board, including five terms as president, and 28 years on the Helix Water District board, one of six agencies that govern the nonprofit Water Conservation Garden. In 1999, when Helix replaced the old El Monte Pump Station, it named the new facility after Buckner.

During their childhood, though, what impressed his sons most was their father's "love of natural history," said Michael Buckner, with obvious affection. "We were young and impressionable and it rubbed off on all of us. Everyone of us has a love of nature, we've all had greenhouses and we all collect rare plants."

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▪ **The Water Conservation Garden** is at 12122 Cuyamaca College Drive West in El Cajon. It is open daily from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., except Dec. 24 and 25 and Jan. 1. For more information, visit [www.thegarden.org](http://www.thegarden.org). On Nov. 30 at 6 p.m. at the Water Conservation Garden, Michael Buckner will discuss "Succulent Color Splendor," a look at the creation of a succulent landscape from aesthetic and practical viewpoints. Admission is \$5 for garden members; \$8 for nonmembers. On Dec. 4 from 1 to 3 p.m., Water Conservation Garden Education Coordinator Elizabeth Ramos will teach a class on making succulent wreaths. These living decorations can last up to four years. All materials are included. Admission is \$40 for members; \$50 for nonmembers. To register for either class, call (619) 660-0614.