

## In brief

WHAT Private ranch.

WHERE One hour north of San Francisco, USA.

SIZE A 550-acre estate with eight acres of gardens.

SOIL Clay, infertile.

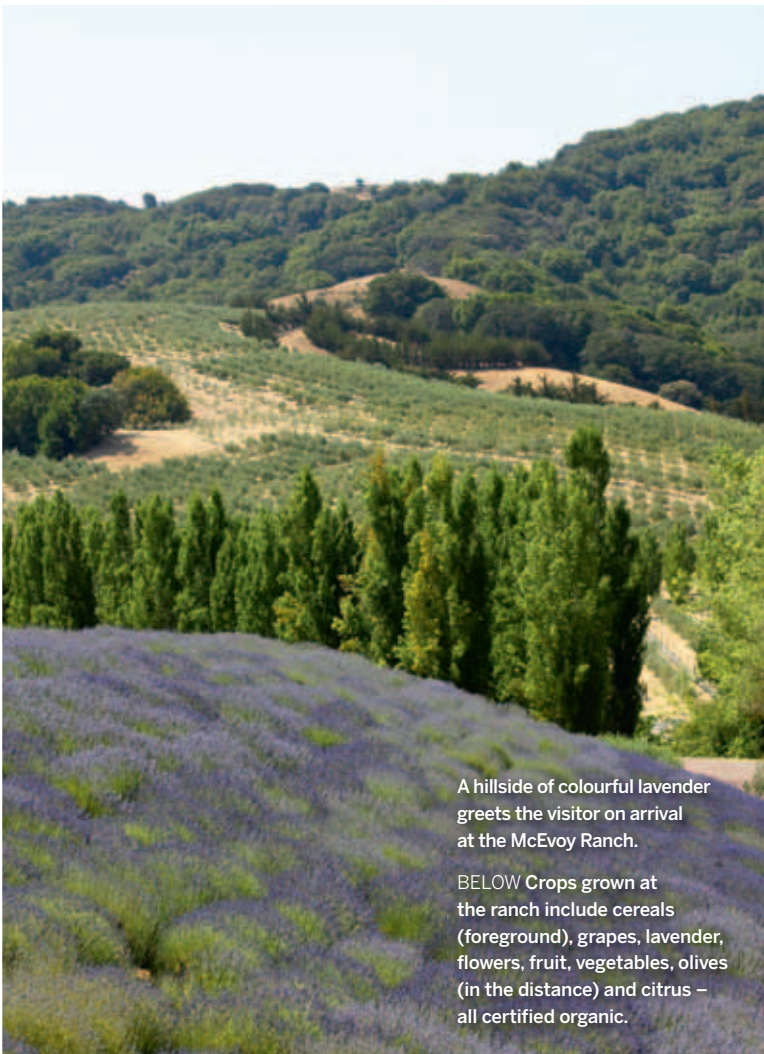
CONDITIONS Mild winters, cool dry summers.

SPECIAL FEATURES Extensive gardens, including a large Kitchen Garden, surrounded by olive groves, orchards and vineyards, all certified organic.

# California dreaming

The gardens of Nan McEvoy's ranch near San Francisco are set among olive groves and vineyards, in a perfect blend of utility and beauty

WORDS KATE FREY PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS



A hillside of colourful lavender greets the visitor on arrival at the McEvoy Ranch.

BELOW Crops grown at the ranch include cereals (foreground), grapes, lavender, flowers, fruit, vegetables, olives (in the distance) and citrus – all certified organic.



Bursting with salad crops, lavender, maize and vines, the abundant Kitchen Garden sits on a gentle incline overlooking the neat lines of olives on the slopes opposite.



A pelargonium-lined path leads through orchards to the terraces of the Kitchen Garden.

BELOW Next to the kitchen garden, which has its own pizza oven, is a pagoda topped with giant carved lizards.



The McEvoy Ranch sits among sloping golden hills touched by wind and fog from the ocean 15 miles away. Its entrance marks the start of a world in which art, gardens, food, agriculture and stewardship of the land combine.

Nan McEvoy, a former chairwoman of the board of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, bought the ranch in 1991 as a place for her grandchildren to get to know the country and to experience “picking green beans and making meals and conversation with friends”.

For visitors to the ranch, who may have come for one of the tours or workshops, the first impression of the estate is of a long bank of lavender. On the surrounding hills a sea of olive trees shimmers. Nan has planted 18,000 organically grown trees here, plus seven acres of wine grapes for the ranch’s small winery. In the valley the roof of a pagoda is visible above lush foliage. It is surrounded by cottages, barns, a glasshouse, orchards and terraces with vegetables and flowers. Among all the planted richness are native oaks – coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) and valley oak (*Q. lobata*), both stately trees, although still young. Nan says she is committed to conserving native oaks and grasses and to sustaining the eco-system that supports insect and bird life.

Six acres of gardens lie at the heart of the ranch, where manager Margaret Koski-Kent grows flowers, vegetables and fruits of many varieties. The gardens begin with a bed of irises growing from a mulch of white oyster shells. Further on, a delicate tracery of California pepper trees (*Schinus molle*) blurs the façade of the pagoda. Nearby are a number of large olives with the brilliant blue shrub *Echium candicans*, pomegranates, perovskias, *Salvia clevelandi* and feverfew (*Tanacetum parthenium*). The orchard is a mixture of apricots, apples, peaches, pears and plums while Mediterranean plants spill over the top of a wall, attracting insects and birds.

### Nature and bounty

A winding path lined with red pelargoniums leads up the hill through the orchards. At the top are vegetable garden terraces, each divided into small beds with a rich mixture of vegetables, fruit and flowers grown for the ranch’s table and their farm shop in San Francisco. Margaret does more than 500 sowings a year to ensure a steady flow of produce, selected for flavour and adaptability to the ranch’s cool summers and mild winters.

The kitchen garden is an intimate space, surrounded by low stone walls and set with trickling fountains. Circular beds with stick teepees hold climbers such as *Cobaea scandens* and scarlet-flowered runner beans. On one side of the garden are Meyer lemon trees. Paths are mulched with wood chips and rustic arbors around the seating areas have an eclectic mix of hops, *Akebia* and *Aristolochia* vines. A large clay pizza oven sits next to the kitchen. The produce from the gardens acts to bring together the staff of the ranch at daily lunchtime gatherings, not just for sustenance, but conversation and friendship. Nan McEvoy herself usually joins in. “One of the best things about working here,” Margaret says, “is that the garden is a place where the cycle of planting-to-eating and conversation and feedback happens every day.” □

### USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS McEvoy Ranch, Petaluma, CA 94952, USA.

OPEN See website for details opening times and events.

TEL +1 866 617 6779. WEBSITE [www.mcevoy.com](http://www.mcevoy.com)

### American garden



“ A place where the cycle of planting-to-eating and conversation happens every day ”



### Making gardens with balanced ecosystems

- Consider all factors: soil, climate, water resources, exposure, slope, surrounding ecosystems, local pests and diseases.
- Don’t use pesticides or herbicides – practise prevention rather than reaction.
- For biodiversity, preserve or plant native species. Include non-natives that support insects and pollinators.
- Grow a diversity of crops and rotate them to minimise build-up of pests and diseases.
- Grow plants that are adapted to the site’s soils and climate.
- Create healthy soil by using compost, cover crops and mulches.

Nan McEvoy is committed to conserving grasses and the native oaks that support a large diversity of organisms. ABOVE Many of the crops grown at the ranch are sold in the farm shop in San Francisco.