

Gathering of Gardeners 2005

Dirk Winter - Owner/President

Developer Dirk Winter is such a tree hugger that he almost went to jail for refusing to remove a tree on his first construction project in 1971. "I love trees and try to keep as many as possible when building," says Winter, owner and president of Moonstone Hotel Properties, which encompasses Cambria Nursery & Florist and 11 distinctive inns in Cambria, San Simeon, Carmel, Monterey, Yosemite and Cottage Grove, Oregon.

Thankfully, Winter wasn't incarcerated for going against the wishes of a city planner by favoring a tree over parking spaces, but he definitely made his respect for the environment known.

"It amazes me how most people can't understand a developer who is into gardening," he says.

As a child, Winter was driven by an uncanny fascination with caring for seeds and plants. At age 12 he began working for a nursery in his hometown of Whittier, California. "I would ride my bike to the nursery and help out with watering and seed propagation," he says. "They would frequently pay me in plants, which I thought was terrific."

When Winter's family moved into a new house during his teen years, he was given permission to design and care for the landscaping in the large backyard. Here he grew sweet peas for his mom and took pride in a healthy succulent garden. "This experience really reinforced my gardening passion," he says.

During Winter's senior year of college at California State University at Fullerton, where he studied geography, city planning and cartography, his father made the gutsy decision to leave his teaching career and to use his accrued retirement to invest in property at Mammoth Lake in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. In 1971, he invited Dirk to help with the construction of an apartment complex and to act as an investment partner—thus launching Winter's path as a developer. "We eventually sold the apartments at a good profit, enabling us to build and invest in other Mammoth Lake properties, including single-family residences and small commercial projects," Winter says.

Relocating to Cambria in the heart of California's Central Coast in 1983, Winter built his company's first inn, the Sea Otter Inn, an oceanfront property along Cambria's picturesque Moonstone Beach Drive. Winter's father ran the hotel's front desk full time while Winter himself acted as maintenance man and gardener. "The curb appeal of our landscaping really drew attention," Winter says. "I had so many people coming up to me and asking questions about the plants, that I could hardly keep up with my gardening work."

When Winter purchased the historic 26-acre Cambria Pines Lodge property in 1990, he advanced his "curb appeal" philosophy, transforming the grounds with themed gardens, exotic plants, an organic kitchen garden and nature pathways. The property was run down, and it would take time to obtain permits for serious improvements, but guests appreciated the hotel's obvious care and commitment to landscaping—enabling Winter and company to build a loyal customer base.

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“I started to realize that I could pursue my passion for gardening by having hotels,” Winter says. “Working in nature is an ideal complement to my interest in planning and building.”

Particularly interested in enhancing the health of plants, Winter considers himself a “dirty gardener,” meaning he prefers natural methods such as integrated pest management as opposed to using poisons and pesticides. “Gardeners like me often discover what helps plants before farmers and scientists do,” he says.

Winter had the chance to really let his garden fantasies fly when, in 2001, he purchased a faltering nursery business located across the street from Cambria Pines Lodge. Since then, he and his team of garden experts have made Cambria Nursery & Florist a destination unto itself, showcasing demonstration gardens, landscaping services, as well as classes and workshops that are open to the public.

Winter and his team continue to share their passion through their “Gathering of Gardeners” signature event, which launched at Winter’s Oregon property, the Village Green Resort, in 2003. This two-day garden extravaganza offers a festival-like atmosphere including seminars led by world-renowned horticultural experts; a gardeners’ breakfast; and informational booths with everything from garden art and compost demonstrations to education on sunscreens and therapeutic exercises for gardeners’ hands. The 2005 Gathering of Gardeners events will take place on September 17–18 at Village Green Resort in Cottage Grove and on October 21–23 at Cambria Nursery & Florist in Cambria.

“Gathering of Gardeners is meant to attract people who are highly into gardening, and to increase peoples’ knowledge of gardening,” says Winter, who attends every lecture at the events. “Our goal is that it become a ‘must-do’ event for avid gardeners from throughout the world.”

As for the day-to-day operations of Moonstone Hotel Properties, the business is still “family run” in every sense of the word. Winter’s daughter Tawny manages Cambria Pines Lodge, daughter Lacy works at the nursery, and his wife, Lauren, handles hotel interior design and other projects.

The company uses a “garden” theme as its key marketing message—appealing to those with horticultural interests and to everyday guests who simply enjoy the beauty of nature as a serene and relaxing getaway.

And while Winter is a little too busy these days to work as a full-time gardener, he does conduct his hotel business from a small office on the nursery grounds. “I don’t get to landscape all day anymore,” he says, “but I’ve got a great view of the gardens.”

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