It was late September, 1967, when I first encountered the kingdom of Alan Chadwick. My parents and I drove through the gauzy edges of the fog bank that lay over the town of Santa Cruz. The car rounded the curve in the road that separated Cowell and Stevenson from my college, Crown, dorm rooms newly painted, awaiting the first crop of students. There, in the shining afternoon sun, above the steep embankment below the college – what was that place, all that color? A brilliant blooming hedge of 4 foot zinnias, stretching hundreds of feet along the top of the bank, was backed by another row of what I learned were tithonia, Mexican sunflowers – crayola orange, velvety grey-green hollow stems, favorite of the monarch butterfly. Alan Chadwick and his crew of summer workers had sown the seeds, and planned and planted this great flowering wall that delineated the lower edge of the garden—a blazing beacon to welcome incoming students I’m sure, but just as much for the butterflies, and the little wasps and all the other flying visitors that were called to the riotous hillside.

I wondered about that place on the hill. As spring came, I began to attend a meditation class that was held in the garden, on the porch of the garden chalet. I’d open my eyes to the light and see the young roses and the shimmer of the ocean far away but visible from where we sat. This was what I wanted – to be part of this garden on the hill.

The man who directed the garden turned out to be a charismatic and charming Englishman in his late 50’s named Alan Chadwick. Tanned like ruddy leather, dressed in crisp nautical blue and white, often only shorts and boots, with a shock of gray hair that he’d toss back abruptly, he’d always be working somewhere. I’d come down the path to find him and say “I’d like a job.” Leaning on the spade, tilting his head to the side like the blue jay that would perch on the handle when he left it to go pull a hose, his blue eyes would sparkle. “Heavy or light?” he’d ask me.

Time spent in the garden became the only reality for me. By spring break, I was spending almost all of my time there with the small and dedicated cadre of workers who’d fallen in love with the man and the site and placed themselves at his service. Soon I took a leave of absence from school. It was typical of Alan that he didn’t even seem to notice or care that we were living in the woods on the other side of the fence. Periodically some university disturbance about non-students working in the garden and taking advantage of student privileges would arise, but it blew over our bent heads as the beautiful beds and borders continued to take shape, carved from the steep chaparral slope that Alan had chosen to work on.

I learned that Alan had come to Santa Cruz at the request of an old friend of his, Freya von Moltke, who was the companion of a visiting professor of Humanities. Several of the professors realized eventual development was going to change the beautiful Cowell Ranch property drastically, and decided to build a garden at its center. Freya told the professors that she knew just the person to build a garden. Alan Chadwick. She and her first husband Count von Moltke had been involved in the resistance movement and planning the reconstruction of Germany at the inevitable end of the Second World War. Before the Count was executed, he had entrusted Freya
to establish a place where people could learn of beauty and creation to counter the forces of so much destruction in the world. Here was the opportunity to create such a memorial: Alan, born into a wealthy eccentric family in England, had studied horticulture as a youth, been a painter, a violinist and a Shakespearean actor, and had managed the British Embassy gardens in South Africa.

He came grudgingly. The fog in Santa Cruz caused great discomfort to his back which had been injured in the war. But he accepted the task, and began to dig. Reaction to Alan was mixed. There were those in authority who worried about allowing the students to be influenced by this mad magic man. “Of course there are Undines and Fairies and Elves!” he once began a lecture. Every now and again some issue would generate a whirlwind that would catch us all up in it – for instance when the university decided to take part of the nursery garden and the woods next to it to build the provost’s house. For weeks, we hatched plans at lunch of leaving once and for all to sail off to the Seychelles Islands, on the other side of the globe, which Alan described with great enthusiasm as a place we could build a better garden in a much more felicitous climate. It was exciting and unsettling - and in the end, we moved the fence and the perennials, and carried on.

We felt total allegiance to Alan in his working out of the sacred task laid upon him by his friend Freya. He talked of “sensitivity, observation, and obedience to the laws of nature” – what a concept for California kids in the late 60’s! We knew this was about something larger than vegetables. The Vietnam War was still raging, and for all of us it was a defining issue of our time. It was such a relief to be shown a role for humankind of nurturing the earth as stewards of this growing garden on this particular piece of land. His unbending insistence on proper techniques and the acquisition of a discipline based on authority beyond human rules and regulations was novel.

I remember going down to Stevenson College to water and tidy up some flower beds laid out around a cluster of dark redwood trees. Alan had planted tall starry nicotiana. In the dusk, the whir of the wings of the hummingbird moth was startling. Breathing in the perfume of the evening-flowering white tobacco, I sensed the plant was as aware of me as I of it. This awareness of having a place in the life of the natural world was Alan’s gift to those of us who worked with him. He made it real to us that plants are alive, they give us everything, and that the soil is the skin of the earth to be treated with tenderness.

Each day began and ended the same: we began cutting flowers as soon as we could see, before the sun came out, before the bees took the pollen and shortened the vase life. The soft mornings were filled with the sound of mourning doves and quail calling “Papaver, papaver!” and the snipping of secateurs. Later, students and secretaries would idle their cars and take flowers from the buckets to their dorms and offices. Nothing was sold. No one was paid. The labor was love.

Then came watering, double digging the clay soil to form the long, wide beds that were dressed with compost, bone meal, wood ash, whatever the crop required, and transplanting. There would be strong coffee in the mornings, made not in a percolator, but in one of those glass globes. The newly formed Friends of the Farm and Garden donated some money that paid for food, but in the beginning Alan shared the bread and cheese from his basket to supplement the vegetables that
came from the garden.

Later, sprinklers set, we’d gather for breakfast. I remember, in the summer, Alan frying tomato slices in butter, breaking in eggs, then a big handful of chopped parsley – a proper English breakfast I’d never seen before. And bread – even the bread would bring up a fascinating discussion of the difference between good real whole grain bread, and the white fluff available in the emporium. Then back out into the beds to move the sprinklers again and take up the day’s work until the conch blew for lunch. And then in the late afternoon, as the sun’s rays slanted through the bean trellis, we’d set sprinklers again, and someone would put the kettle on. When it boiled, we’d gather for tea and teaching and stories; then back to work and watering until it was too dark to see.

It wasn’t always peaceful; Alan was a challenge. We watched closely and were alert for his mercurial moods. When he was in physical pain (often, due to the chilly fog) or cross for whatever reason, the great storm clouds would gather. If a student with his head in the clouds and no sense of where his feet were came to the garden for a peaceful stroll, he’d likely be brought to the present by a loud voice and look up startled to notice an angular man loping down the path shouting angrily “Get out! Get out!” Many were intimidated.

But when Alan was happy, there was no one I had ever seen who could convey delight so well. The sun would shine from his being onto all of us as we sat on the chalet porch at tea time, fascinated by his tales. He would hold up a rosy sprig of annual phlox drummondii from the little bouquet in front of us and expound on the exquisite mathematics of each five-petaled, star-centered floret in the scented cluster. We would peer into the center of the flower, trying to see what he saw, agreeing about its cosmic significance in great seriousness, when all of a sudden he’d stop, cock his head, clap his hands and toss off a teasing nursery rhyme, just to puncture any pomposity.

Life was timeless in Alan’s orbit for those of us who were his merry band and constant companions in the very early days of the garden. He left UCSC in 1972 to build and manage other gardens, including the Green Gulch in Saratoga where he died in 1980.

Alan is quoted saying, “It’s not the gardener who makes the garden, it is the garden that makes the gardener.” The garden that he made inspired those of us who were lucky enough to work with him and those who continue to experience that garden long after he has gone; we will continue to make other beautiful gardens (and eat beautiful food, and smell beautiful flowers, and write beautiful poems) in his memory and in his honor.