**First in the Nation: The Tribe that owns a Botanical Garden**

by

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**Abstract**

This case describes the history of one of the unique enterprises in Indian Country—The Heronswood Garden, a famous botanical garden that now has a strong cultural orientation to the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe in Washington State.

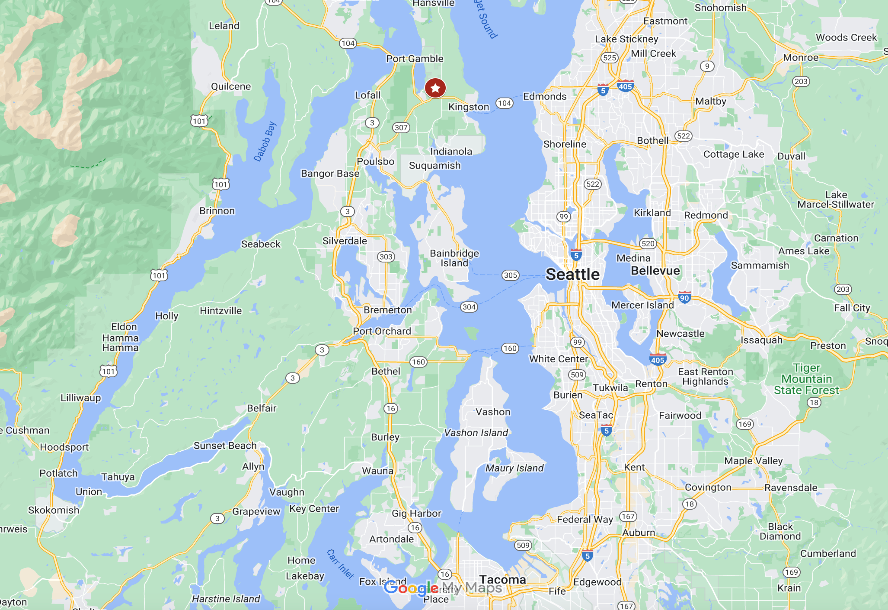
The Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe is one of the three S’Klallam tribes in Western Washington. Its 1,349-acre reservation is located on Port Gamble Bay on the Kitsap Peninsula. Nearly half of the Tribe’s population of 1200 live on the reservation which has until recently had 100% of their land in trust which maximizes tribal control over the land and the people who live on it.

Port Gamble has been a leader in the self-determination movement in Indian Country and has a number of acclaimed services and programs for its population. It has also been a leader in conservation with the clean-up of Port Gamble Bay, the site of a major timber company, a priority.

Like many tribes in Washington in recent years the Tribe has worked to expand its land base, usually purchasing adjacent and nearby land for conservation, economic development, and expansion of land for housing and other facilities. In 2012 the Tribe took the unusual step of purchasing the famous Heronswood Garden. This case is that story.

**Heronswood Garden - A Brief History (1987-2012)**

The Heronswood Garden is a famous botanical garden on 15 acres nearly adjacent to the Port Gamble reservation in Washington State. The garden was developed in 1987 by Robert Jones and Dan Hinkley. The Tribe had no former relationship with the garden or its director Dan Hinkley. Fifteen years later the situation would dramatically change when the Tribe bought Heronswood. In the meantime, Heronswood’s development, reputation, and future history would emerge.



**Heronswood Location**

Hinkley reports “In July 1987, after having looked at the property twice prior during that year, Robert L. Jones and Daniel J. Hinkley made an offer to buy the house at 7530 NE 288th and an adjoining 2.5 acres for $105,000. The bid was accepted, and they took possession of the property on September 1st of that year.”

The simple three-bedroom house had little in the way of landscaping around its perimeter. The previous owner, Ms. Betty Donnelly, kept horses on the property; fence paddocks partially surrounded property surrounding the house on the eastern and southern perimeters.

The intent of purchasing the property was to begin a nursery and create a garden. Daniel Hinkley had received his B.S. in Horticulture and Horticultural Education from Michigan State and a M.S. in Urban Horticulture from the University of Washington.  Robert Jones received his M.S in Architecture from the University of Washington. Both were fully employed at the time of purchase; Jones was practicing architecture in Seattle and Hinkley was teaching horticulture at Edmonds Community College. They both continued to commute by ferry daily to these positions until 1993/1994, respectively.

Landscaping surrounding the house commenced in earnest during the autumn of the year of purchase. Several still extant trees, now mature, (notably *Stewartia pseudocamellia*, *Acer griseum*, *Acer palmatum* (cv), *Cornus kousa*) were planted in the autumn of 1987. On Thanksgiving Day of the same year, the extended family of Jones helped erect a 40’ long hoop house to the west of the current bog garden, on the site of the now existing hornbeam hedge garden.

By the following spring, this greenhouse was already brimming with plants being cultivated in containers. (note that upon moving to the property, the couple’s possessions fit nicely into a rental moving van while it took three additional trips to move a diverse collection of containerized plants, seedlings, and cuttings Hinkley had cultivated for approximately 10 years prior).

By late summer of 1988, Hinkley was taking plants to sell at local plant conferences. In 1989, following a tour of small mail order nurseries in S.E. United States under the encouragement of Dr. J.C. Raulston, Hinkley and Jones made the fateful decision to sell what they might produce through mail order. In the spring of 1990, with the help of two friends, Toni Hahn and Eric Nelson, they published their first ‘catalogue’ consisting of 11 pages of alphabetical listings of plant genera, sorted by trees, shrubs vines, etc, without descriptions.

Concurrently with the development of the nursery, the garden and its collection of unusual plants began to take shade and gather some interest. On days they were not working their full-time jobs, the two worked to clear their adjacent 2.5-acre woodland of undergrowth and unwanted vegetation (the existing site eastern woodland garden) Hinkley removed a considerable amount of concrete from a patio on the western side of the house and created the still extant bog garden in the winter of 1989. A vegetable garden with raised beds was created on the eastern side of the house (on the site of the existing double perennial borders) while the then unused fields to the south (the current event facility circa 2020-2024) and the west (the current formal potager) were used to produce plants for the nursery- both in the ground and in containers.

In 1991, the second edition of the catalogue was published, increasing the number to 60 pages including spare descriptions of the plants offered. A skeleton staff of part-time employees was put together, including Nancy Bartholomew (a former horticulture student of Hinkley's at EdCC) and Duane West. West, still employed by Heronswood Garden, would go on to become the general manager of the nursery while positively influencing the planting style and standard of maintenance of the gardens.

On this same year, Hinkley and Jones purchased an adjoining 2.5 aces north of their property from the Duke family. Included in the sale was their home, a small two-bedroom manufactured home that would become, until its removal in 2020, both the nursery staff break room and lodging for summer interns. Notable residents of the infamous ‘trailer’ as it was called include Salish artist David Boxley, Jonathan Wright (current director of the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields), Dr. Richard Olsen (current director of the National Arboretum in Washington D.C.) and noted L.A. based ceramicist Dustin Gimbel.

A significant commission of large shrubs for the annually replanted Rockefeller Center Garden in N.Y.C. provided a significant amount of capital for expansion of the nursery. It should be noted that the development of the nursery and garden was entirely self-financed other than the original purchase of the properties.

Alan Hanson joined the staff as maintenance supervisor in 1992. Fully retiring in 2022, Alan remains the longest continually serving employee with Heronswood under three different owners. During his and Duane West’s tenure, the nursery operation was moved entirely to the newly acquired property while constructing approximately 20 greenhouses by the year 2000.

With the nursery operation removed from property surrounding the home, now ‘garden house’, of Hinkley and Jones, several new gardens were installed during the early 1990’s. The vegetable garden on the eastern side of the garden became a hedged formal double perennial border. The field to the west used previously for plant production became a formal potager, with exquisite stonework laid by John van den Meerendonk, who would in the 2020’s become an instrumental force as a volunteer in expanding the garden under the ownership of the PGST. The now iconic Hornbeam Hedge Garden was installed in 1991. The Woodland Garden trail systems were also laid out during this time with the bulk of the now mature understory trees and shrubs planted.

By the late 1990’s, the Heronswood catalogue had swollen to 325 pages boasting up to 2500 different plant taxa, shipped to all 50 states, Japan and Europe. Many of the plant offerings were from wild collections made by Hinkley who had begun, in 1989, making seed collecting expeditions to similar climates of the world in both the northern and southern hemispheres. The nursery and garden became activated by offerings of plants not before seen in American gardens as well as by Hinkley’s lectures across the globe and a significant offering of on-site classes. By 2000, there were 25 full and part-time employees.

On that millennial year, after having supplied the W. Atlee Burpee company with plants for their catalogue, Hinkley and Jones were approached by the company to consider selling the operation and land to their business. After what had seemed an impossibly quick rise from obscurity to relative notoriety, and years of seven-day, long hour work weeks, the couple made the unexpected decision to accept their generous offer.

Within 6 months, resulting from a significant downturn in the economy as well as capricious expansion of their company, W. Atlee Burpee filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Hinkley and Jones continued to direct the operation of Heronswood for an additional five years while living in the ‘Garden House’ until 2004. In June of 2006, the garden and nursery were abruptly shuttered and many of its staff dismissed, including its founders.

Burpee had originally purchased the property for $4.5 million and added adjacent land for an additional $900,000. It tried to sell it for six years with an original asking price of $11 million and eventually lowered the selling price to $1.8 million.

**Tribe Buys Heronswood**

In 2012 the Port Gamble Tribe made a successful bid at auction to purchase Heronswood at an undisclosed price but considerably above the minimum of $749,000. Noel Higa, director of the Port Gamble Development Authority, the Tribe’s economic development arm, said the Tribe had eyed Heronswood for years. He said: “We’ve never gotten to a crystalized concept of what to do with it, but it’s a community source of pride, and we wanted to make sure it stayed available to the community.”

Fortunately, Hinkley quickly joined the Tribe’s Heronswood team with a vibrant band of volunteers, PGST members and a newly hired skeleton staff to begin the restoration of the garden which was in serious disarray.  Hinkley worked first as a volunteer, under the helm of Foundation Director Lori Matson, and Nancy Heckler who had accepted the first director’s position. Heckler’s tenure was short but her contributions to a quickly evolving direction the garden might take should not be overlooked. Upon Nancy’s resignation, and with the newly hired Foundation Director, Joan Garrow, a considerable amount of work was accomplished through volunteers and limited staff (Ralph Purser, Celia Pedersen, Bernie Folz, Alan Hanson and Duane West) in revealing a garden that had been neglected for 6 years.

In addition, Garrow and Hinkley in concert built a new footing for the garden, re-introducing plant sales, classes, tours, memberships, annual lectures, weekly promotional emails and symposia. Joan Garrow in particular should be credited for the vast amount of time she invested in the revival of the garden.

Hinkley was attempting to transition away from the garden just as the Covid pandemic began in 2020. He delayed his full retirement until November of 2021 but continues to be involved in the garden by teaching classes and supporting

In the early years after the Tribe’s purchase, most of the garden’s focus was on restoration, building a staff to maintain it, and developing economic strategies to secure the garden’s financial future. As a unique entity within the Tribe, Heronswood’s governance is also unique. The garden is managed by the Port Gamble S’Klallam Foundation, a 501 (c)(3) tax-exempt organization, rechartered from the Klallam Development Fund in 2002, to benefit the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, its members, and its mission. The Foundation has its own board of directors, which includes all Tribal Council members, and actively raises funds for the garden and other causes within the Tribe. Its mission is to improve the quality of life for Port Gamble S'Klallam tribal members while increasing the understanding of the Tribe's rich cultural heritage with people who reside in the Puget Sound area and visitors from far and wide.

Heronswood’s Director reports to the Foundation and a steering committee provides support with decision making, whilst bringing knowledge and experience in specific areas, including economic development, fund raising, horticulture, marketing, etc. The garden’s current mission statement is as follows: “*People depend on plants. The Heronswood Garden seeks to inspire our community with its plant collections and charismatic landscapes, to educate them on the connections between plants and people, to encourage them to protect plants and their natural habitats, and to appreciate the great diversity of plants and the people who care for them*.” Both the Foundation and the garden manage their own budgets, overseen by the Tribe and approved each year by Tribal Council. On several occasions, it has been mooted to transfer the management of the garden to Noo-Kayet Investments, the Tribe’s enterprise wing, but to date the status quo remains. The garden profits greatly from the Foundation’s fund-raising activities, and the Foundation also benefits as the garden provides an enticing location for Foundation activities and a highly visible symbol of shared success.

With governance established, the garden once more opened for public visitation. Heronswood could not rely on nursery revenue to fund the garden as its now dilapidated greenhouses had been removed. Instead, a membership scheme was created where paying members received free access to the garden together with other benefits. Ticketed entry was also established with open days initially limited to Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, in spring and summer only (we are now open Wed-Sun in spring/summer, and Sat/Sun in winter). During its life as a nursery, Heronswood had hosted educational classes, and these resumed as another source of revenue. Public plant sales also became significant sources of income, though the plants were provided by external nurseries, often those owned by friends of Dan, with revenue shared between Heronswood and the nurseries themselves. Our public plant sales alerted the public to Heronswood’s reawakening and provided the first opportunities for Tribal vendors to generate their own income through the garden. The stage was set for Heronswood’s second incarnation.

In 2015, three years after the garden was purchased by the Tribe, the garden received a cedar welcome pole, carved by tribal artist Brian Perry.

A stone sculpture in a garden

Description automatically generated

It was Perry’s first pole and its location close to Heronswood’s entrance also loudly announced another first, the Nation’s only tribally owned public botanical garden. Since then, great strides have been made at Heronswood to develop exhibits that not only educate the visiting public about the Tribe, its history and culture, but also welcoming tribal members and their families into the garden as a safe place to work, trade, learn and recreate. This transformation was completed when a second cedar pole arrived in 2023, this time slated for a peaceful retirement. The Chief Kitsap memorial pole was carved in the 1970’s and Heronswood’s new S’Klallam Connections Garden was chosen as its final resting place, marking the moment when the garden became an integral part of the life of the Tribe.

Heronswood is a botanical garden. The ‘b’ word may not appear in the signage, but day-to-day we care for a vast array of plants – over 8,000 species and cultivars – including those that are rare and endangered, all their names and locations carefully noted in our indispensable database. We educate the public about plants, through our signage, newsletters, classes, garden tours, and through public appearances by current and former staff.

A person in a plant garment

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

We provide a safe and pleasing landscape for people to enjoy, whether strolling gently with kids and dogs, as the venue for a wedding or other significant event, or under threat of Slapu, the wild woman of the woods during our popular Haunted Heronswood event.

*In* short, Heronswood performs all the roles of a public botanical garden, but over the past twelve years, we have also sought to deepen our connection with the Tribe and provide tribal members with resources and opportunities.

In part of course, the politics of the situation demand such action. The Tribe continues to provide a significant proportion of our income and for the garden to continue its work, we must secure the good will of the Tribe, both its leaders and its members. However, it is also right and proper that we do so and in this, the goals of both a botanical garden and the Tribe are very much aligned. We both revere and protect the resources that nature has provided.

Heronswood has and continues to support the Tribal family in many ways. All tribal members, community, and staff have free access to the garden whenever the gates are open. Tribal vendors attend our public events with no cost to themselves and under contract, can sell their goods in our gift shop. Just over half of our staff of eleven come from the Tribal community and we invest in training, both on site and out of state, helping staff develop new skills and experience. Heronswood has hosted attendees of the Tribe’s summer school and re-entry programs and participates in its food bank and community garden. We work closely with the Culture Department to expand our cultural offerings and help during events, such as the 2023 Canoe Journey when Heronswood staff produced over 40 cedar wreaths to adorn visiting canoes. We also collaborate with the Early Childhood Education Department, hosting kids throughout the school year for both play and guided activity, plus our summer kids’ event, the Camas Club.

A person sitting in a chair and a plant

Description automatically generated

Heronswood advises on landscaping projects on the Reservation, including around the new Health Center, hosts tribal departments for meetings and away days in our buildings, and offers significant discounts to Tribal families wishing to use our events facilities for weddings and other private events.

Since the purchase of the 15-acre Heronswood property, which at the time included around 3.2 acres of gardens, we have added four new gardens, expanding our cultivated area to over 6.7 acres. The Renaissance Garden depicts an abandoned logging camp reclaimed by nature and nods towards the Tribe’s historical connection to logging in Kitsap County. The Rock Garden brings native plants from the peaks of the Olympic Mountains, once tribal territory, down to where they can be enjoyed by tribal members.

The S’Klallam Connections Garden (SCG), our most recent development (started in 2022), was created entirely by our S’Klallam staff and is designed with tribal members in mind.

A group of people standing in front of a wood fence

Description automatically generated

Though only in its early stages, our goal here is to educate tribal members about those plants that are important to the Tribe, whether as edible, medicinal, or culturally significant species. While the garden is open to all, supplementary educational materials will be provided to tribal members showing them how to identify useful plants and harvest them sustainably. The SCG was funded with support from the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries and Museums (ATALM) and tribal member Debby Purser, Heronswood’s Volunteer Coordinator and creator of the SCG, was invited to describe this work at ATALM’s national conference in November 2024. Key elements of this garden include a clam pit, gathering area, and camas prairie. While historically tribal members relied on camas (the edible bulb of *Camassia quamash*) as a primary component of their diets, most tribal kids today have never had a chance to taste it, an unfortunate legacy we hope to change. Our camas prairie is in its second year and received its first annual burn in the fall of 2024. Traditional burning has long been used by indigenous people to manage prairies as it both eradicates invading tree seedlings and encourages soft new growth that entices deer and other prey animals to congregate. Little is known of the details of traditional burning methodologies and our tribal staff are learning on the job, a beautiful example of the reinvigoration of Native culture here at Heronswood.

Whether through our programs or in the layout of the garden, Heronswood has adapted to life as part of the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe. This is not to say that we have forgotten our origins, and we protect the legacy left to us by our founders, Dan Hinkley and Robert Jones. However, we begin to see plants through a different lens under indigenous management. Conservation has always been at the heart of any botanical garden’s work and Puget Sound Prairies are one of Washington State’s most endangered habitats, with less than 10% remaining. Most were lost to development and the end of native land management practices. The result was that prairie plants like golden paintbrush (*Castilleja levisecta*) became rare and endangered. As a botanical garden owned by native people, we value their role in managing land and recognize that their traditional practices can help rare plants like golden paintbrush return from the brink. The connection between people, plants, and place should be central to all botanical gardens and is a lesson that Heronswood is well equipped to teach.

While the garden has made bold strides towards a deeper relationship with its owners, we still have much work to do. New signage in the S’Klallam Connections Garden will improve its utility, while expanding our accessibility will aid Tribal elders hoping to visit the garden. Funds have been raised to acquire new tribal art for the garden, including two new poles, allowing Heronswood to fulfill a role as a cultural center. We plan to transition one of our staff to the role of Tribal Liaison so that through them, we can further develop working relationships with other parts of Tribal Government and the membership.

The recent purchase of the Miller Lake property, adjacent to the garden, will amplify our role as we provide access to this large piece of largely undeveloped land for tribal members. The garden has also embarked on a feasibility study examining a proposed new events center for the garden that we hope will not only improve the garden’s financial sustainability (and reduce the need for Tribal hard dollars), but also provide additional services to the Tribe, such as an emergency shelter and a venue for large tribal gatherings. Our work was recently recognized by the Northwest Horticultural Society, who presented a tree to the Tribe to thank them, both for saving Heronswood and for opening it up again for public visitation. The tree, a native Garry oak (*Quercus garryana*), will be planted in the S’Klallam Connections Garden in the winter of 2024/25.

**Conclusion**

The Port Gamble Tribal leadership made a bold and farsighted decision to purchase Heronswood twelve years ago, with great uncertainty as to its value and uses, but the intervening years have shown this to be a beneficial relationship for all involved. Over the next twelve years, we hope to explore the following questions:

* Heronswood has successfully increased its revenues through investing in new public events, broadening our private events business, and creating new revenue streams such as a gift shop. Can the garden boost revenues enough to become financially self-sufficient, or even profitable?
* Recruiting skilled labor for the garden is challenging, especially from within the Tribe. As we aim to increase tribal employment at the garden, how can we develop a pool of employees skilled in horticulture?
* The visiting public have a huge hunger for more information on the Tribe and its culture and history. In the absence of an official Cultural Center, how can Heronswood feed this hunger without stepping beyond the line of comfort for tribal members who may not wish to share with outsiders?
* Heronswood seeks to increase visitation by tribal members. Garden entry is free, and yet we still receive relatively few tribal visitors. What can we do to change that?

1. Copyright 2025 by The Evergreen State College. \*Dan Hinkley is Director Emeritus at Heronswood, Kelly Sullivan is Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe’s Executive Director, Ross Bayton is Heronswood Garden Director. This case and teaching notes are available at [www.evergreen](http://www.evergreen).edu/native-cases [↑](#footnote-ref-1)