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## Sonoma, Calif.: Cornerstone Gardens

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Usually when I hear the words “[garden](#) center,” I glaze over, imagining rows upon rows of tiny plastic containers, sprouting stalks so wobbly and forlorn it’ll be months until they resemble actual plants. I picture tedious displays of hose nozzles and my horticulturalist husband rattling off the Latin name of every species in sight.



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

The first sign that [Cornerstone Gardens](#), on the southern outskirts of Sonoma, is not your typical garden center is the long-dead Monterey pine outside, its skeletal limbs coated in 25,000 blue plastic [Christmas](#) balls. Then there are two 11-foot-high Adirondack chairs, and a “flying” picket fence levitating 7 to 10 feet above the perimeter.

And that’s just what you can see from the road.

In addition to Blue Tree and 16 other “concept gardens” designed by leading landscape architects, the nine-acre complex is home to a local boutique wine collective, a cafe and a handful of design shops. Artefact Design & Salvage, crammed with architectural antiques from [Europe](#), stocks Italian carved fountains and sandstone garden orbs from [France](#), as well as finds from closer to home: pressed-tin house numbers or jars of [Napa](#)-made

hand cream. Across the courtyard, there are mod knickknacks at Zipper Gifts (gold-plated fortune-cookie place holders, \$12).

Blurring the line between art and commerce, Cornerstone is so high-concept that even its founder has trouble describing it. “It’s always been hard to explain to people,” said Chris Hougie, 56, an entrepreneur and former toy inventor who started Cornerstone in 2004 after visiting Chaumont, a collection of folly gardens in the [Loire Valley](#). “I wanted to change the notion of what a garden can be — a place that’s as much about ideas as about plants.”

The garden's rotating exhibits now include an orchard of plastic daisy pinwheels designed by Ken Smith, an above-ground "wishing well" by Rios Clementi Hale Studios, and Pamela Burton's sloping hay-bale bunker adorned with feather grass and a lily pond. Don't try too hard to figure this place out: It's much more fun to feel, rather than think, what the gardens are trying to tell you. Best of all, you won't have to remember a single Latin name.

Cornerstone Gardens, 23570 Highway 121, Sonoma, Calif; (707) 933-3010;  
[www.cornerstoneplace.com](http://www.cornerstoneplace.com).