

LOST IN YONKERS

A CENTURY AFTER A NEW YORK LAWYER SET OUT TO CREATE
A GARDEN TO RIVAL ROCKEFELLER'S, THE ONCE DERELICT
UNTERMYER GARDENS IS BEING RESTORED TO ITS FORMER GLORY

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNIE SCHLECHTER



A vista at the restored Untermyer Gardens in Yonkers, New York, which is open to the public. A Paul Manship sphinx sculpture (one of a pair) tops marble columns. **OPPOSITE:** A Persian-style canal bordered by tropical plants and Japanese holly.

A CENTURY HAS PASSED SINCE Samuel Untermyer set the audacious tone for a prize property in Yonkers, New York, with its monumental Hudson River views. “Make me the finest garden in the world,” he reportedly instructed landscape architect William Welles Bosworth—with the not-so-veiled subtext meaning “outdo John D. Rockefeller’s,” since Bosworth had created that acclaimed Gilded Age showplace just upriver. Untermyer wanted better and, in fact, best.

East met West as a diverse sampler of classical history was erected: Two-thousand-year-old Roman marble columns were imported. A two-and-a-half-acre walled Persian garden was built with formal canals, intricate mosaics, and a Temple of the Sky, all watched over by Artemis and a pair of sphinxes. Across the property, a Temple of Love perched above a precipitous, man-made waterfall. Grand.

The bold and highly successful attorney, who was a face of Hitler resistance and a pioneer of women’s suffrage, could not have envisioned the perils the showplace he willed, in part to the city of Yonkers in 1940, would face. Once 150 acres with 60 greenhouses and 60 gardeners, his showpiece would exceed what city budget crunches allowed.

“It came to unbelievable ruin, like the sack of Rome,” says architect Stephen F. Byrns, who founded Untermyer Gardens Conservancy in 2011 to partner with the city and bring it back, raising \$5.5 million to date. “Treasures were sold off, vandalized, stolen—shocking desecration.” The garden was even a favorite site for rituals by Son of Sam David Berkowitz. Surviving architectural features were engulfed by porcelain berry and poison ivy, or graffitied and crumbling.

Back it is coming, though. “It is extreme what we are trying to pull off,” Byrns says. He enlisted the founding director of horticulture from nearby public garden Wave Hill, Marco Polo Stufano, as volunteer adviser, and hired Timothy Tilghman, who had previously worked for Stufano, as head gardener.

His staff now comprises six other gardeners, not 60. His mission: “to re-create Samuel Untermyer’s vision,” Tilghman says, “but as a public resource, one that is open free of charge seven days a week.” As many as 1,000 visitors on a peak Saturday can include local schoolchildren, or garden clubs from as far off as Argentina, who book tours of this cutting-edge revival.

With staff and funding constraints, “re-create” doesn’t mean literal restoration, however. Untermyer loved bedding schemes, and to honor him, the Walled Garden’s canals again glow with tulips in spring, followed by summer annuals. But where his long-gone mansion’s gatehouse mostly still stands, the smartly renamed Ruin Garden goes with the flow instead: “Its graffiti backdrop is part of the history now, too,” Tilghman says; he lets each space, as is, tell him what to do. “Don’t curate it too hard. Don’t overornament anything.”

History, along with Untermyer’s vision and that incredible view, have left plenty to work with, Tilghman figures, in spite of some bumpy chapters in between. ■



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The main gate to the Walled Garden. The Gatehouse overlooks the Hudson River. A marble lion is inset in a stone wall. Columnar golden European beech trees shade a canal. A red oak grows beside the Temple of the Sky; head gardener Timothy Tilghman’s seasonal plantings include *Gomphrena* and coleus. Untermyer Gardens Conservancy president Stephen F. Byrns. The Temple of Love sits atop a hill framed by oak trees, one of which dates to the 1910s. For details, see Resources.