



# Reflections on the First Ten Years of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy

Excerpted from *Forgotten No More: The Restoration of Untermyer Gardens*  
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# Reflection

## Stephen F. Byrns, *President*

I first discovered Untermyer Park in the late 1980s, when I moved to Yonkers. It was very much a park, not a garden, as it was so poorly maintained. The canals in the Walled Garden were dry, and there was nothing of horticultural interest other than some trees—the majestic weeping beeches and a few others—that hinted at a former glory. The rest of the park was a wreck, covered with invasive plants, trash, and graffiti, especially the Temple of Love (then called the Eagle's Nest) and the Vista.

The presence of so much distinctive albeit deteriorated architecture very much appealed to me as an architect and historic preservationist, so I explored the grounds with great interest and brought some friends to see this remarkable place. There were two preservation battles going on at the time: one to save the south end of the property, which had been acquired by a bank when a

developer went bankrupt; and one to save the north end, the site of the Italian Gardens, now owned by St. John's Riverside Hospital and slated to be demolished for the construction of a new nursing home.

Nortrud Spero was a leader in the former effort, which succeeded in saving the ruined Temple of Love and the surrounding woodlands from private development, greatly expanding the park from 16 to 43 acres. I was a leader in the latter effort, which sadly failed. I even debated the president of the hospital on cable television to present the merits of changing the footprint of the nursing home, but he held all the cards, so there was no hope. Shortly after that, in 1997, I moved to Riverdale.

It was only in 2010 that I was enticed to return to Untermyer, when I learned that the fountains in the Walled Garden had been turned on for the first time



in nearly 25 years. Their effect on me was huge. At the time, I had a successful architectural practice in Manhattan and was a Landmarks Preservation Commissioner and a board member of Wave Hill, the noted public garden in Riverdale.

This enormous ruined garden called to me like a siren, playing on my passions for architecture, historic preservation, and horticulture. I thought of starting a conservancy. My decade as a Yonkers resident connected me with a lot of people there, and my subsequent life in New York City brought another source of valuable contacts. I decided to resign from the Landmarks Commission and the Wave Hill board and focus my energy on Untermyer Gardens. Through Wave Hill, I knew Marco Polo Stufano, its famed, retired director of horticulture, and as it turned out we were both in Rome in the fall of 2010. After spending a day together looking at gardens in the Campagna, I asked him if he would join my effort as a horticultural advisor to the Conservancy, and he immediately said yes!

With the help of Yonkers' former mayor Angelo Martinelli, I negotiated with Mayor Phil Amicone, the Parks Department, and the Teamsters Union, and we started moving in a good direction. I met several times with Betsy Barlow Rogers, the founder of the enormously successful and influential Central Park Conservancy, who sagely guided me through the initial shoals. By early 2011, a small board of Yonkers residents had been formed, and with a bit of seed money, we set out to find a gardener.

Miracle of miracles, Timothy Tilghman appeared on the scene at Marco's recommendation. The perfect person, he was 42 years old, with an outstanding educational and professional background. Strong as an ox, he is an Eagle Scout with a bundle of energy and enthusiasm and, like me, a practical Midwesterner. Little did I know that his artistic abilities were impressive. Our relationship has been outstanding since the beginning, with a shared can-do attitude coupled with an intense ambition about what the garden can be.

At the beginning, I didn't know that Samuel Untermyer was Jewish, nor that he was the international face of resistance to Nazism from 1933 on. I didn't know that his wife, Minnie, was Christian, and that they were prominent progressive forces to be dealt with. I didn't know that Untermyer's garden was called the finest in America and was visited by 30,000 people in one day in 1939. I didn't know that the Walled Garden (which Untermyer called a Grecian Garden, a misnomer) was an Indo-Persian garden. In fact, I knew nothing about an Indo-Persian garden, certainly not that it is based on the concept of the Garden of Eden, a shared belief of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

From my childhood on, I have always had a sympathetic interest in other religions. In college, I majored in history with a curiosity about how physical forms reflect the environment, beliefs, and experiences of those who create them. Suddenly, this confluence of architecture, historic preservation, horticulture, history, and different religions appeared as the perfect amalgam of all my interests! I was in love with this project.

For the first five years, I juggled my work as a Manhattan architect while running the Conservancy as a volunteer. In 2016, I decided to leave my practice of 35 years to work full-time at the garden.

The projects have gradually unfolded over ten years: the Walled Garden, the Temple of Love, the Vista, the Ruin Garden, the Rock and Stream Garden, the Rhododendron Walk, and the Ornamental Vegetable Garden. Timothy and I have been going full steam, and so far we are still standing and things look pretty good. Fingers crossed, we will continue our merry pace, adding ever more gardeners to our current nine as the landscape grows. After all, Samuel Untermyer had 60 full-time gardeners!

We are ambitious and driven, as was Samuel Untermyer, and my hope is that this garden and its story will inspire generations to come.

# Reflection

Peter Boodell, *Board Chair*

## Financing the Dream of a Garden

As a founding board member of the Conservancy, I have traveled every step of the journey to date—and what a remarkable journey it has been. The financial winds have been at our back, with our budget increasing from \$99,000 in the first year to \$1.4 million this past year and \$1.7 million projected in 2022, our eleventh year. As we passed our tenth year, we also surpassed \$10 million raised, with more than \$2.5 million invested in capital improvements to the garden. This is a true public-private partnership, and one that can be an example for cities and public spaces around the country.



The Conservancy began with a small band of enthusiastic supporters and big dreams. From the start, the City of Yonkers embraced our efforts, no one more so than Mayor Mike Spano. The Conservancy has earned an astonishing return on its investment since hiring Timothy Tilghman as head gardener in 2011. We never could have accomplished so much in so little time with anyone else. As our donors increased in number from 50 to more than 1,500, our team of gardeners has grown to seven in 2021 and a projected nine in 2022—a boon for us, though still 85% below the peak in Untermyer's day!

Next year we will embark on our most ambitious project yet—and at \$2 million the most expensive: restoring the Persian Pool, whose once-lovely sea life mosaics are thoroughly deteriorated. The ravaged pool is surrounded by the renewed splendor of the Walled Garden, a potent reminder of the garden's tragic fall.

Having served as treasurer for the last six years, I am privileged to chair the Board of the Conservancy starting this year. A critical element of my job is to ensure the smooth trajectory of the garden over not just my term but the next hundred years. Last year we started an endowment for the Conservancy. Now at \$110,000, it is minuscule compared to our financial needs and aspirations, but from acorns do great oak trees grow.

I am fond of Wendell Berry, who writes about a sense of place, a community where individuals find a mutual commitment to stewardship and a reverence for the land and the environment. We work very hard to raise the money to make Untermyer Gardens such a place, free for every visitor to enjoy its beauty and unique heritage. We are continually investing, not only in our plants and hardscape, but also in our education, music, and programs for the community. I am proud of our new tree-planting program on Warburton Avenue, which extends the reach of the Conservancy beyond our garden walls.

Our office was staffed entirely by volunteers until 2016, and volunteers continue to play an essential role, with more than one hundred now actively engaged. As we move forward, our volunteers, our donors—individual, corporate, and foundation—and our partners in the City of Yonkers are all critical stakeholders in our shared success.

Please join us on this journey, and please visit the garden. It is a wondrous place.

# Reflection

## Timothy Tilghman, *Head Gardener*

Ten years have never gone by so fast. While I feel that we are still in the early days of this restoration project, a quick look around Untermyer Gardens challenges that perception. My first impressions of the property in 2011 are still vivid—the ruined beauty of the barren Walled Garden, the grand Vista almost impassable with weeds, the distant Temple of Love on its garbage-strewn, rocky pedestal, and the roofless gatehouse, which bore the scars of years of vandalizing. Clearly, these ten short years have been transformative.

And it's not just the physical space that has seen dramatic change. Ten years ago, when I might encounter one or two dozen visitors in the course of a perfect spring Saturday, I could only imagine the throng that flocks here today. As someone who has devoted his career to being a gardener in public gardens, this is an especially meaningful mark of our success. When Steve Byrns approached me about reviving this amazing public garden, albeit one with virtually no public and no cultivated horticulture, I jumped at the chance to be its first full-time gardener since 1940.

While many bemoaned the deterioration of Untermyer's original horticulture and architecture over the previous seventy years, I felt that to be a gardener in this space at this moment in time was a privilege. To inherit the wholly unique and creative structural bones of a once world-renowned garden and an exuberant horticultural philosophy without the strictures of established plantings was a priceless opportunity to reimagine Untermyer's original vision in a wholly new interpretation.

Our first season entailed less fine horticulture and more land-clearing and amateur archaeology. Thanks to archival photographs, we were made aware of a watercourse that once cascaded down from the Temple of Love. With the help of a local Boy Scout troop and the first of many Eagle Scout projects, we removed several truckloads of broken bottles and other litter to



reveal a series of beds along the cascade. They are now filled with gorgeous prairie-inspired pollinator-friendly plantings.

Days were spent hacking back the unruly vegetation smothering the Vista steps and concealing the ancient Roman columns at its base in order to open the view to the Hudson River. Precarious moments were spent balancing on ladders and gatehouse walls to remove fallen trees and invasive vines from what would become the Ruin Garden. As we excavated more rubble and removed wild overgrowth across 43 acres, more garden revelations followed. Clearing the Carriage Trail alone, making it passable for the first time in a generation, I would harvest enough wood to heat my home for several winters.

One Saturday in the late fall of 2011, I was determined to find evidence of the lost Rock Garden, which archival images depicted as a large, sophisticated garden with a substantial hardscape. We had just experienced our first hard frost, and I was optimistic that I could find some of the original stonework. After scouring the more visible ground, I came across an obviously manmade rock formation lurking below the foliage and fallen trees. I grabbed some loppers and a chainsaw and uncovered what looked to be an informal, rock-lined path proceeding from the pile of stones and opening into what was evidently an old pool: I had discovered the stream, then filled with silt, that ran through Untermyer's Rock Garden. I was thrilled.

Later that same afternoon, Steve arrived, having recently found maps of the original Color Gardens. Focused on his own quest, he seized clippers and a shovel and promptly disappeared down the slope to dig for the Color Gardens without taking in the news of my discovery. When he returned, he was brimming with excitement at unearthing an original fountain basin, similarly silted in below the soil. My news about the Rock Garden would not register with him until Monday.

This is not to imply that Steve is not interested in my efforts. In our division of labor, Steve generally focuses on architectural restoration and fundraising, but his horticultural knowledge is robust and his expertise on the history of the Untermyers and their property encyclopedic. All of this feeds a collaborative back-and-forth between us that has been highly productive. In the early years, when Steve was still commuting to his architectural firm in New York City, we would meet every morning by phone on his drive to work and only in person on Saturday mornings, when he would drop in on his way to the farmers' market. Although the Conservancy staff is now onsite and we see each other throughout the day, I am still on Steve's speed-dial, so he can alert me when he spots a patch of poison ivy or a fallen branch or a half-buried air conditioner in some far-flung spot.

Steve's passion and approach to the garden have set the tone for the entire organization. As support for

the Conservancy took off, I was able to start building a team in my second year. Through amazing serendipity, Drew Schuyler, who grew up several blocks from the garden, took on a seasonal internship and returned as a full-time gardener after graduating at the top of his class in the professional program at Longwood Gardens. Jessica Norman brought a tenacious attitude and helped in every aspect of our early development before moving on. Three more Yonkers natives joined the team, Stewart Molina, Liz Dreeben, and John Jacono, each one enthusiastic and possessing different gifts; an authentic Persian gardener, Maryam Farzaneh, now attends our Persian garden; and most recently, a percussionist and self-taught gardener, Mario Irigoyen, has joined us. One of the many things I learned from my mentor and friend Marco Polo Stufano, who first recommended me to Steve Byrns, is to surround myself with passionate, hardworking, enthusiastic people. This has been a dream job, in no small part because the people I work with are a true inspiration.

The Conservancy's original goal, to restore a semblance of the original horticultural display executed by Samuel Untermyer and his staff of 60 gardeners, even without tackling the infrastructure, was not a humble one. But with every achievement we have aimed higher. A groundswell of support from board members, donors, volunteers, the community, and the City of Yonkers unleashed a momentum that has allowed us to restore eight major areas of the garden, as described in the first half of this book, and to imagine the next phase of the garden, as described in the second.

To my mind, this restoration project is just emerging from its infancy. Yet, while there is plenty of opportunity to elevate and develop the horticultural standards throughout the garden—and we will—our accomplishments so far are considerable. I am proud to think we have outgrown our early moniker, America's Greatest Forgotten Garden. Though still a work in progress, Untermyer Gardens is assuredly an outstanding garden resource and is highly unusual in being free to everyone—the ultimate public garden.