

Gove Hambidge, "S. Untermyer in His Enchanted Gardens"

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SAMUEL UNTERMYER IN HIS ENCHANTED GARDENS

"Samuel Untermyer, who is one of America's busiest and best-known lawyers, spends most of his spare time among flowers, shrubs and trees, creating enchanted gardens on the grounds of Greystone, his home in Westchester County, New York. During a stiff legal battle on which all of his energy is concentrated, he will retire to his estate and find peace in growing delphiniums and dahlias and orchids. 'These three,' he says, 'are my favorite flowers.'

"His gardens are among the loveliest in America. And the best thing about them is that they are not merely a rich man's hobby. Many rich men have beautiful gardens, but few know much about them; the knowledge is vested in expert gardeners and landscape artists who are paid to do all the planning and the work. Mr. Untermyer not only knows the multitude of plants on his grounds by their common and in many cases their Latin names; he also knows their ways and their needs with the intimate knowledge a father has of his own youngsters

"He has, in other words, the same absorbing passion for growing flowers that a few men have for collecting fine antiques. In fact, there was a time, he said, when he was a collector of paintings; but a long while ago his affections were transferred to plants, which also are objects of art, but living ones.

"When I first talked with Mr. Untermyer, he was in the midst of some of the biggest work of his career - formulating a plan, as special counsel for the Transit Commission, for the reorganization and transfer of ownership of New York's huge subway system. The work necessarily involved sharp legal tussles, and the solving of vastly complex problems of finance and management. At the time, Mr. Untermyer's name not only was spread all over the front page of all the New York newspapers, but column after column on the inside pages was devoted to him and his transit plan - including what everybody of importance thought of him and it, complimentary and otherwise.

"Yet I found him, on Saturday afternoon, sitting peacefully on the edge of a garden pool. In his buttonhole, characteristically, was a small fresh orchid, that symbol of the loveliness and insouciance of flowers which he wears every day of his life.

"Ah. I'm glad you are here. I'd like to ask your advice" was his greeting. "What would you think of a row of fine old boxwood planted along the sides of that path?" He was looking down a path that approached the house - a path bordered by tall trees, on either side of which stretched emerald lawns.

"I expressed an opinion. Then he showed me, already bought, the box he planned to use - six wonderful specimens perhaps a hundred years old, not yet unloaded from two big trucks in which they had just arrived.

"Did he really want my advice? No; I believe he wanted an excuse to tell me about his new boxwood, very much as a youngster would make an excuse to talk to a visitor about a new electric train. New York subways? They were for a time forgotten. It was a Saturday afternoon, and Samuel Untermyer was free to play the game he loves, and he had six new boxwood trees to plant.

"He pointed out the rugged character of the surface of these boxwoods. That's the way he likes them. He would not for a moment allow the men to trim off the "bumps" in order to get the flat regularity admired by some people, he commented. Nor does he like the trees contorted into fantastic shapes. 'A boxwood tree is like a man, more interesting if not too smooth. The pruning shears should yield to the contours of natural growth.'

"He has a good many specimens of boxwood on the place, \$25,000 worth probably, with single specimens worth a thousand dollars apiece. They are dark and old and velvety in texture, remindful of old-time gardens - the gardens of George Washington at Mount Vernon, or Louis XVI at Versailles, or Pliny the Younger in ancient Tuscany, all of whom valued boxwood for its staid, characterful beauty.

"The boxwood at Greystone is the tight, small-leaved English variety, Mr. Untermyer explained. It takes a hundred years or so, to grow to respectable size - in the Dutch garden later I saw plants eight inches high that he told me had been there for fifteen years.

"This new planting of boxwood is characteristic of the changes that are going on all the time on the Untermyer place. Not only is there the usual and expected replacement of plants that have failed or aged into decrepitude; there are also constant experiments and rearrangements. Mr. Untermyer takes a keen satisfaction in landscape gardening, and as he told me while we sat on the stone terrace at the rear of the house, he himself laid out the grounds and gardens, with the exception of the formal Greek garden.

"The place originally belonged to Samuel J. Tilden, and Mr. Untermyer bought it in 1889. At that time it comprised seventy acres, to which he has since added a hundred more. Now, of course, it is nothing like it was in Tilden's day. The shrubs, a great many of the trees, the gardens, the roads and paths and pools and stone, Mr. Untermyer has planned and put in during the thirty-eight years he has lived there.

"This gigantic landscaping task, never quite finished, is an unending outlet for his abundant creative energy. There is always something more to do, something that can be bettered. Indeed, one great advantage of the creating of gardens over other kinds of creative work is that you are never finished. When you do a painting or a piece of sculpture, it is done; you may enjoy it all your life, but work on it again you cannot. A garden, on the other hand, is a little world perennially in process of creation.

"We left the house - the hallway of which is as filled with flowers as though the garden had somehow marched straight in from the out-of-doors - to walk for a while over the grounds. These lie on hilly rock-strewn land on the edge of the city of Yonkers, with the Hudson below and the Palisades lifted up sharply on the New Jersey shore opposite.

'It is ungrateful soil, thin and stony' Mr. Untermyer remarked, 'and I have had to make a good deal of it myself so that it would be more friendly and nutritious. I have blasted out rock, and in many places mixed large quantities of peat into the top soil - a thousand tons of it at least. This is especially necessary in the case of rhododendrons, which like an acid leaf-mold not completely decomposed. We also use about twelve hundred tons of straw-manure a year. We could not get along without it; you have to feed plants, like humans, plenty of nourishing food if you expect them to grow up healthy and vigorous.'

"These rhododendrons are among the chief glories of the place. There are thirty thousand of them, Mr. Untermyer told me, spread practically throughout the estate in groups and as border shrubbery, mostly under trees, since rhododendrons are grateful for shade. The best of them, he said, are the hybrids got in Europe.

"Among the groups I saw magnificent plants twenty feet or more in height, and my imagination was busy at once conjuring up a picture of the grounds in spring, clothed in cloudy garments of rose-pink and red

and lilac and white. To me, there are no more beautiful things on earth than some of the rhododendrons with their luscious tones of color, and thirty thousand together during blooming time must be a magnificent color symphony.

"On the far side of the glade, by one of the winding paths that thread the grounds, we came to the rock garden. This is of piled-up stones of great size, with one huge flat rock set atop, a cavern of black shadow beneath it, and a slender fall of water dropping into a rock pool at the bottom. Winding steps leading under rough stone arches ascend to the great flat rock above, from which there is a fine panorama of the Hudson and the Palisades. In the crevices of the piled-up rocks grow a bewildering profusion of flowering plants. The whole garden looks as though it had been set there a long time ago by Nature playfully tossing about monoliths; but it was designed by Mr. Untermyer, and the great rocks, he told me, are knit together by iron rods run completely thru them.

"A little farther along in our stroll we reached the Greek garden. This is a closed garden formally laid out, in its center a pool or canal in the shape of a cross with long arms, bordered by straight small evergreens. On the north side is an architecturally beautiful little Greek theater, guarded by two tall columns topped with sphinxes executed by the famous modern sculptor, Paul Manship. In the past, the stage of this outdoor theater was used for the presentation of plays

"On the west side of the Greek garden is a semicircular classic monument with gleaming marble columns, overlooking another part of the formal garden below; and on the south side is a wall and a great wrought-iron gate, thru which one looks down the pathway where Mr. Untermyer was contemplating boxwood at the time of my arrival. At various points in the garden are old Greek statues - including one which was dug up on the grounds by workmen a year or so ago, and about which quite a furor was made by art experts, until investigation disclosed that it had been stolen and buried by a butler in the days when Samuel J. Tilden lived here.

"Color in the Greek garden, at the time of my visit in September, was practically confined to a border of marigolds like a narrow carpet of rich orange and dark red and yellow. Among them, set at regular intervals, were lantanas, trained to standard form, like little trees four or five feet high, covered with verbena-like flowers in orange, yellow and bronze that harmonized perfectly with the marigolds spread below. These lantunas, Mr. Untermyer told me, are taken up in the fall and kept in a greenhouse. I saw geraniums similarly trained to standard form --little trees with great, glowing red flowers.

"A place of peace and beauty, this sunsoaked Greek garden, where a man can come to loaf and invite his soul in lazy reverie and day-dream

"We fell to talking quietly here of the different kinds of enjoyment men get from gardening. Mr. Untermyer said; "Mine, I suppose,

is to a considerable extent esthetic - such enjoyment as one gets from the contemplation of fine art. I have a love of rich color, and I want as much of it around me as possible. My bulb gardens, for instance, in the spring, I should like you to see them. Fifty thousand tulips, a riot of color - and for harmony or contrast, spread beneath them like a velvet carpet, fifty thousand rich-textured pansies. Can you imagine what a sight that is? Such things give me the thrill of music played on a great organ."

"This is more than esthetic enjoyment, of course, since it is he who composes the music and controls the organ stops; it is creative as well. To vary the metaphor, it is akin to the weaving of rich tapestries or the painting of mural decorations. But in gardening one can work on so much larger a scale than in any other art except possibly architecture.

'I find a strong appeal in the practical, experimental and scientific aspects of gardening, too,' he went on - 'propagating plants, coaxing them to grow even under adverse conditions, making new plant creations. At Greystone we not only try out all kinds of new plants as they appear on the market; we create new varieties of our own. I like to go into the greenhouse with a brush or a rabbit's foot, carefully transfer pollen from the stamens of one variety of flower to the pistil of another, and see what comes of the cross. We have, for example, a hybrid delphinium produced in this way, and a beautiful salmon-colored salvia, a cross between red and white. I should like to do a good deal more of this kind of experimenting than I have time for.'

"Where did he get his love for flowers? From his mother. She was a woman, he said, who could make anything grow, and the house where he spent his boyhood in Virginia, although it was a city house, was always filled with flourishing plants. 'From the time I could understand anything, I have regarded flowers as an inseparable part of daily life.'

"What a fine thing it would be, I thought, if every boy could be brought up with the same viewpoint. From the beginning to the end of life, what an unflinching source of wholesome enjoyment he would have. When a man has a garden to make and care for, can he long be bored? When he knows well the beauties of his own garden, can he fail to find joy in the varied beauty of all nature? And when he loves plants, can he be without earth-rooted care of sympathy toward men and women?

"From the Greek garden, Mr. Untermyer and I passed down a covered colonnade or pergola protected on the north side by a high wall, against which were placed graceful '*Campanula pyramidalis*', planted in pots, with their delicate, bell-shaped blue flowers sunning themselves against fan-shaped trellises.

"The pergola opens upon "the vista," a creation of Mr. Untermyer's of which he is justifiably proud. This is a terraced approach from below to the Greek garden, perhaps 250 feet long and fifteen feet wide, the terraces forming a series of long, easy steps, part turf and part cement; and the steps are flanked on either side by dark '*Cryptomeria japonica*', an exceptionally fine and picturesque columnar evergreen.

"On the north side of "the Vista" is a series of intimate, small garden closes, laid out by Mr. Untermyer, one below the other, on flat terraces connected by little stepped passageways of natural stone, on either side of which English yew grows above a carpet of dark periwinkle. Among the series, shut off one from another by walls or hedgerows, there is a pink garden, a yellow garden, a quaint Dutch garden with box-edged beds, a garden of delphiniums, a garden of roses, an old-fashioned garden to supply cut flowers, a dahlia garden - the last two a mass of autumn bloom.

"I shall not describe these gardens in detail; a great many of the plants, of course, were not in bloom in September. But because it will be of practical interest to other amateur gardeners, I am going to list at least some of the flowers Mr. Untermyer named as growing here.

"In the pink garden: annual asters, verbena, snapdragon, phlox, 'Lilium speciosum (var. 'roseum')', dianthus, 'Sedum spectabile' or stone crop, zinnia, rhodanthe or everlasting, fibrous-rooted begonia, hollyhock, gladiolus, clarkia, veronica, chrysanthemum.

"In the blue garden: forget-me-not, heliotrope, torenia, petunia, globe thistle, salvia, scabiosa, monkshood, ageratum, delphinium, anchusa.

"In the red garden: gladiolus, geranium, begonia, penstemon, fuchsia, canna, 'Phlox drummondii'.

"In the white garden: 'spiraea filipendula' or meadow sweet, Japanese and German iris, Marguerite, lantana, verbena, sweet William.

"In the yellow garden: lantana, calendula, chrysanthemum, coreopsis, canna, mimulus.

"In the cutting garden: cleome or spider plant, helenium, cosmos, aster (annual and perennial), peony, scabiosa, phlox, snapdragon, rudbeckia, Japanese iris, dianthus, zinnia, helichrysum or strawflower, lily.

"At this point I realize that I have not yet nearly exhausted the things of interest to the amateur flower and landscape gardener on the Untermyer estate. To do so would require several articles of the length of this one.

"There is the road below the house, for instance, upward-winding around a wood peopled with fine old oaks, maples, hemlocks, dogwood and other forest trees; bordered here and there by a wall of cut stone or natural rock, over which droop the slender branches of 'forsythia suspensa', and up which clammers 'ampelopsis reitchii' and English ivy.

"There are, too, innumerable little things which were of great interest to me, such as the dwarf apple and pear trees trained against stone walls in double U form with four upright cordons; the use of

'Pachysandra terminalis', a semi-shrubby, creeping evergreen of easy culture, as a ground-cover under dense shade trees; the placing of mountain ash, rich in autumn with orange berries, as accents here and there on the grounds (but they do not do as well as he would like in this soil. Mr. Untermyer commented); the way an occasional gnarled old apple tree has been left, even on the lawn near the house, as a genuinely picturesque and valuable part of the landscape; the great numbers of birds that regard Greystone as a sanctuary.

"And there are, finally, the extensive greenhouses, on which I can no more than touch, where are grown not only all kinds of flowers, but melons and vegetables for winter, as well as dwarf peaches, nectarines and figs in 'espalier'; where too is housed the finest private collection of tropical plants in America, including some two thousand rare orchids of surpassing loveliness.

"For, as must be now be clear, Mr. Untermyer is wealthy enough to indulge his hobby on the most extensive scale. But what an essentially wholesome, normal, satisfying and infinitely varied hobby it is - passion rather, in his case; a passion which adds to, instead of helping to destroy, the world's store of beauty. If anything would make me desirous of assuming the burden of wealth (a game, as I believe, not often worth the candle), it would be that I too might create some such place of deep delight as this gardener's paradise."²⁸