Untermeyer adds foliage and felines to attractions

By Jackie Lupo

YONKERS — When Stephen Byrns, president of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, walks the grounds of the gardens’ 43 acres, he sees a wildflower meadow instead of a formal rock garden covered with invasive Japanese knotweed. He sees an ornamental vegetable garden instead of a null field, and a color garden in place of a gravel-paved parking lot. These are a few of the projects Byrns has on his agenda for the next few years.

In the eight years since he spearheaded the resurrection of this former estate in North Yonkers, many of Byrns’ visions morphed into breathing reality, such as the recreation of the walled Persian Garden and the restoration of the Temple of Love, a columned gazebo overlooking the castle in a large pool with a pump that circulates the water. Like the Cascades, the Rock and Stream Garden will feature colorful flowers and shrubs.

The Ruin Garden at the western side of the property began as the name implies — as a ruin. During Untermeyer’s time, this was a gatehouse occupied by an estate employee. Untermeyer died in 1940, and the estate became a Yonkers city park, but many of its features were left to decay. A fire in the two-story gatehouse destroyed all the wood elements such as the roof, inner walls, and floors, leaving a masonry shell, brick chimneys, and mantels. The blighted structure became a magnet for graffiti, including Satanic symbols, recalling past rumors of unsavory goings-on in remote enclaves of the park before its restoration.

"The whole building has been shored up," Byrns said, stepping inside. Today, where the floor used to be, a woodland garden has been installed, with ferns, hostas, heucheras and other plants that thrive on dappled sunlight. A paved alley was found under a foot of soil along the rear of the house, and small cracks along the edge of the pavement were etched out along the house’s outer walls to form small “crack gardens” that look as if they grew wild there. Around the back of the house is "The Grotto," a room built into the side of the hill. "We installed the water trough in this room, with three water jets," Byrns said. "It’s not known what the purpose of the room was." The gardeners will try to coax some mosses and ferns to grow up the walls.

Nearby are the inner gates, where people who enter the park from the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail will see the unico corn and the lion, two relief sculptures imported by Untermeyer, guarding the gate. Vandals long ago destroyed the unicorn’s head, which was there when the sculptures were installed at the gates. "Untermeyer thought it was a horse because when he got it, it was already missing its horn," Byrns said. "But actually it was a unicorn, because it has cloven hooves." This winter, the conservancy commissioned a replacement for the unicorn’s head, which has a slightly more pronounced stub of a horn than the original, so viewers will make no mistake about its species.

This year, the Persian Walled Garden’s color scheme was inspired by the deep purples, golds, and salmon pinks worn as costumes by Persian ballet dancers at a fundraiser at Untermeyer last fall, with a theme of "Mehregan," a secular Persian harvest festival. The annuals are cultivated offsite in City of Yonkers greenhouses adjacent to Trevor Park.

For the past three years, high-school-age special needs students have been helping the gardening staff under the direction of Tilmahen and City of Yonkers arborist Michael Padilla in a garden called “Greenhouse to Garden.”

"All the kids will help with the planting," Tilmahen said. "So they’re also learning about botany, basic planting, and basic propagation." At its annual meeting on May 11, the Federated Conservationists of Westchester will present the teen volunteers with the Edith G. Read Award for Outstanding Student Environmental Efforts.

The Persian theme continues at Untermeyer this spring. The conservancy will hold a Persian concert in the amphitheater on Saturday, June 8, at 4 p.m., featuring the music and dance of the Amir Valab Ensemble. Tickets, $30, are available at untermyergardens.org. The ensemble is known for its renditions of Persian folk music, featuring traditional Persian musical instruments.

Even the two rescue cats adopted by Tilmahen last winter carry Persian-themed names, although all the black cats are not Persians. The female is called "Amir," Persian for "pomegranate," and the male is called "Chenar," Persian for "sycamore," a tree traditionally used for shade in Persian gardens. Tilmahen built a cat door for them to take shelter in a storage room. He is waiting to see whether either feline will be interested in providing "natural pest control" of the many plant-destroying rodents in the garden. So far, neither has left any "gifts" in a bag at the doorway of the conservancy offices, but they are often seen together greeting visitors and basking in the sun.