

MAKE OUR GARDEN GROW

By Jay E. Cantor



I don't think I was spanked but I was certainly chastised. The offense—wasting my allowance—likely a nickel or a dime—on seeds. My age and actual circumstance are cloudy, but it involved a neighborhood project amongst a small group of kids who, authorized or not, commandeered an empty lot previously used as a Victory Garden. This was around 70 years ago and in the aftermath of World War II. I don't remember if the seeds were for lettuce or marigolds, the latter, admired for color and shape.

I have been thinking about this to try to determine exactly what it was that prompted me to become interested in gardens and gardening, something that has consumed a fair amount of time and money in maturity and made possible through the ownership of a quite modest mid-19th century house in a quiet corner of New England. God's little half acre (+ or – according to the deed). What was once a barren stretch of turf now struggles against the elements to provide some visual satisfaction and a fair amount of exercise in confrontation with the rigors of weeding and significant removal of volunteer maple trees which threaten to overspread the cultivated areas and turn the entire domain into a primitive forest.

Why am I telling you this in an art magazine, albeit one that indulges my meandering through a lifetime of American art experiences that have included museum work, teaching, research and art market engagements (20 years at Christie's). It has been stimulated in part by the fact that my gardening friend, Barbara Paul Robinson, has just published her second book based on her own gardening

journey. The first, *Rosemary Verey: The Life and Lessons of a Legendary Gardener* grew out of Barbara's earlier experience of apprenticing with this English garden guru during a sabbatical she took from her high-powered legal career at one of New York's leading firms, Debevoise & Plimpton. As with all that Barbara has done, her dedication to her career and subsequent success were enormous. She

not only became the first female partner at a bastion of white-shoe legal practice, she also became the first female president of the New York Bar Association.

Gardening became a deeper passion when she and her husband, Charles Raskob Robinson, who forsook the business world to become a painter, acquired the former Connecticut home of Eric Sloane whose paintings and illustrated



The garden at Tom Armstrong's Fishers Island home.

books defined a mid-20th century image of rural New England. Reading Barbara's book, *Heroes of Horticulture: Americans Who Transformed the Landscape* (David Godine, 2018), it occurred to me that many of the most engaging and successful gardeners, or at least those of my own acquaintance, have been deeply committed to the visual arts—as practicing artists and architects, curators, museum directors, and collectors. It is also the stimulus for the following casual remarks on the people I have come to know and who are more fully described by Barbara.

The garden world as Barbara describes it, is both public and private and she neatly clusters her heroes in the following categories: The Garden Conservancy; Public Parks and Public Spaces; Public Garden Institutions, Plantsmen, Plant Finders, Nurserymen; and Garden Creators. In thinking about these categories, I wonder whether the distinction between public and private is more a factor of occupation than of motivation. The gardeners I have known, and I have been privileged to become friendly with several of Barbara's heroes, are often pursuing a private passion which they enthusiastically share with both their contemporaries and with future generations. I have often marveled at the fact that gardeners regularly plant trees and shrubs whose maturity they will not live to see. They do so with the confidence that the results will be admired and cherished in the future.

I suspect that the possibility of creating my own personal landscape may have first dawned on me as a student at Winterthur Museum, whose main building, the former home of Henry Francis du Pont, is surrounded by his legendary gardens. While we were not specifically instructed on the garden precinct of Winterthur, it became obvious to me when I wrote a book about the place in the mid-1980s, that it was du Pont's gardening experience that influenced the creation of the interiors at Winterthur. He had studied ornamental horticulture at Harvard and had charge of much of Winterthur's landscape for two decades before he inherited the then 2,000-



The gardens at Wave Hill in the Bronx, designed by Marco Polo Stufano.

acre property. The symbiotic relationship probably had no greater exemplar than du Pont's work at Winterthur. The collecting world may be narrow and competitive, the gardening landscape is conditioned by even more local factors of topography, terrain, climate and, alas, depth of resources.

After Winterthur, I went on to the Metropolitan Museum where I encountered two people who figure in my story, William N. Banks and Gregory Long. Bill Banks was a member of a small group of American art collectors who met regularly at evening events in the American Wing of the Met. Bill, an engaging and gentlemanly conversationalist, collected both American decorative arts and paintings for two homes, one in New Hampshire and the other in Georgia. He had actually demolished his father's 1930s baronial house, an hour outside of Atlanta, and replaced it with an 1828 wooden manse that he rescued from destruction in Milledgeville, Georgia. He re-erected it on the commanding site previously occupied by his father's home. The Milledgeville house had been built by a carpenter architect named Daniel Pratt.

Bill had also acquired an early-19th century house in Temple, New Hampshire, a charming New England village boasting many early structures. Bill chose Temple because of the surviving historical fabric

and, in part because of its proximity to the MacDowell Colony, an artist and writers retreat in nearby Peterborough. He became interested in the architecture of his small village. During his research, he discovered that the architect of his house in Georgia was, in fact, a native of Temple. This story and Bill's achievements as a gardener are recounted in one of Rosemary Verey's seminal volumes, *The American Man's Garden*, a worthy companion to Barbara Robinson's recent work. In his essay, Bill makes clear that his was a gentleman's garden, suited to the architecture and the site and reflected principles of gardening and landscape design articulated by English 18th century landscape designers Capability Brown and Humphry Repton.

This property with its estate garden and landscape design principles provides a useful counterpoint to the style and achievements of Barbara's garden heroes. Acquaintance with Bill and visits to his homes was one of my first encounters with the madly dedicated coterie of American gardeners. It also brought up the important distinction between gardens and landscapes. Landscape architecture as we know it is a later 19th century development, stimulated in part by the creation of public parks and the subsequent development in this country of great country estates.

The preservation of both form the first chapters of Barbara's book. Gardens and landscapes are fragile things, victims of both nature and neglect. In an effort to counter this, in 1989, Frank Cabot, who created legendary gardens at Les Quatre Vents in Canada and Stonecrop in Cold Spring, New York, was inspired to establish The Garden Conservancy. This organization has grown to become a major national force in the effort to preserve exceptional American gardens. The early implementation of this vision was placed firmly in the hands of Tom Armstrong, a Cornell-trained painter turned curator and museum director of great distinction. (A brief episode in the world of investments was readily abandoned in favor of work at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art collection in Williamsburg, Virginia, and the directorship of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts before Tom assumed the leadership of the Whitney Museum of American Art.) It was Tom's organizational skill that helped further the cause of the Garden Conservancy and under him the organization was well and truly launched.

Although Tom tried his hand at raising vegetables on the Whitney roof, it was at his seaside property on Fishers Island

in the Long Island Sound where he was finally able to fulfill his gardening vision. The garden is both formal and casual with sweeps of color in defined shapes and surprising episodes of tranquil green in garden rooms that edge and define the open space. Tom's garden could best be described as disciplined profusion. Having acquired a derelict turn-of-the-century colonial house, he created interiors and exteriors that were eccentric and polite, the perfect venue for house party weekends and wide-ranging conversation. I was treated to a couple of those weekends, usually around the spectacular display of daffodils that spread through the landscape and provided a setting for a fundraiser, which he dubbed Daffodils and Drinks and organized to support the local library. And when the house burned, coincident with Tom's signing a contract to write a book about it and the gardens, he filled in the foundation, created a lawn and continued to entertain until a new, all window, completely modern house could be built, affording an appropriate container for his contemporary art collection and dramatic views into the landscape. That story is told in Tom's book, *A Singular*

Vision, Architecture, Art, Landscape (The Quantuck Lane Press, 2011).

Gregory Long, another museum veteran, counted administrative experience at several New York cultural institutions, including the New York Public Library, the New York Zoological Society and the American Museum of Natural History when he assumed leadership at the New York Botanical Garden. Now on the cusp of retiring after a sensational 29-year career there, he can truly be credited with converting a somewhat disheveled public park into a masterwork of garden design, as well as a world-class research and exploration institution. He has melded competing interests in research, garden development and display, restored its signature conservatory and during his tenure raised \$1.2 billion to build endowment and fund programmatic and audience development initiatives and capital projects. The relationship of art and gardens has been underscored in several displays within the landscape such as the exhibits of work by Henry Moore and Dale Chihuly as well as shows in a new gallery space in the research building. The current exhibition devoted to Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings of Hawaii is enhanced by a conservatory display of the types of plants and flowers O'Keeffe would have encountered during her nine-week sojourn in Hawaii.

Training as a painter lays behind the garden design work of Lynden Miller, who was recruited in 1980 by Betsy Barlow Rogers, a pioneer in the development of public/private partnerships when she directed the Central Park Conservancy. Betsy has just published a book which documents this (*Saving Central Park*, Penguin Random House, 2018). Among her other achievements was cajoling Lynden into taking on the resurrection of the neglected Conservatory Garden at 105th street and Fifth Avenue. This precinct within Central Park had once been occupied by greenhouses that provided plants for the park but during the Depression, as the cost of maintaining them proved daunting, they were taken down and a tripartite garden area was



The Untermyer Gardens in Yonkers.

developed which, over the years, also fell victim to budgetary limitations. A daunting task as the area was dilapidated and disregarded and subject to vandalism when Lynden took it over in 1980. Her dedicated energy along with a corps of neighborhood volunteers helped transform the area into an admired jewel. Lynden explains her design journey and how new schemes for management of urban parks have aided her work, in her book, *Parks, Plants and People: Beautifying the Urban Landscape* (W.W. Norton, 2009) and a compelling video on her website. But it was Lynden's painter's eye, coupled with study at the New York Botanical Garden and close observation of other gardens that propelled her into one of the leading garden designers, responsible for civic and collegiate improvements in New York and around the country. Her massing of plant material and color combinations are often dramatic and visually engaging.

One of her most inspiring contributions to the urban landscape came in the aftermath of 9/11 when a Dutch bulb grower contacted her to ask how he might help. Responding to her request for leftover bulbs, he donated one million daffodil bulbs which Lynden decided to plant in many of the 1700 neighborhood parks across the city. The Daffodil Project continues and has now planted four million bulbs around the city. While Lynden had in-depth knowledge of plant materials, she created her own playbook when it came to plant choices and layout. Understanding a site, recognizing its function and a bit of rule breaking has made for great garden experiences.

Study at the NYBG also provided a basis for Marco Polo Stufano's imaginative creation of gardens at Wave Hill in the Bronx. A family estate with commanding views of the Hudson River had, in 1960, been given to the city by the Perkins-Freeman family. Houses on the property been occupied at times by Mark Twain, Bashford Dean, the first curator of Arms and Armor at the Met and by Arturo Toscanini, making for landmark interest but there was no compelling garden feature. Today, it is the garden which



The Lynden Miller-designed Conservatory Garden at 105th street and Fifth Avenue.

resonates with extraordinary beauty and these are largely the product of 34 years work by Stufano along with his partner of 20 years, the late John H. Nally.

The hillside site includes a variety of garden features including an herb garden, formal borders, woodland and wild gardens as well as a flower garden which overflows with imaginative combinations of foliage and blooming plants that violate conventional wisdom of garden display. Creative invention and painting with a broad brush make for both a lavish display and a pleasing visual experience. One feels that they are looking at a work of art first and a garden second. This is not surprising given the fact that Marco majored in art history in college. His enthusiasm for collecting not only includes unusual plant material but he has also created an impressive personal collection of Aesthetic Movement ceramics.

More recently Marco has acted in a consulting capacity at the Untermeyer Garden in Yonkers. Formerly the private estate of Samuel Untermeyer, an astoundingly successful lawyer in the first half of the 20th century, the property came to the city of Yonkers after other prospects were rejected. The land was subdivided and only parts of the garden remained and due to the city's financial straits, little of the original planting survived. Stephen Byrns, a New York architect with a substantial practice came upon the site and was mesmerized. The important remaining feature, in addition to

the "Temple of Love," was a walled Persian garden. The water feature had gone dry, the pools and surrounding mosaics were crumbling, the vistas were overgrown. As with Betsy Rogers a generation earlier, Byrns created a public/private partnership, rolled up his sleeves, engaged horticulturalist Timothy Tilghman and began the process of recovery. The results after a few years, are magical. Within the armature of the structure, with Marco's advice, the garden has become something of a magic carpet. While not reproducing the original planting schemes it enhances the character of the space, creating a world apart, a landscape of imagination and, yes, reverie.

Each of these gardeners has made their gardens and ours grow through determination and the love of place. You must know the rules before you can ignore them. In gardens, rule breaking is, as with any other form of art, critical to success and it is gratifying to be able to spotlight a few of the many success stories Barbara Robinson has so thoughtfully described.

And to get to know more about Barbara's own wonderful garden, you can take a video tour and learn more at www.brushhillgardens.com.

I should explain my title, "Make Our Garden Grow." It is, in fact, a song from Leonard Bernstein's operetta, *Candide*, and given the many salutes to this American genius on the 100th anniversary of his birth, it is my personal tribute to him as well. ■