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County Gardens to Show Off

By: Tovah Martin 03/03/2005

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Granted, it's bleak right now, and your garden seems like buried treasure. But the time will come when the sedums will sprout again. There will be dogwood blossoms, delphinium spires, angelica umbels and crabgrass once again. You can count on it. There will be plenty of chances to grovel in the dirt, wipe the sweat from your forehead and wash the dirt from your fingernails. The coming season holds all those promises. Plus, thanks to the Garden Conservancy, with the opening of the growing season comes an invitation to visit some of the finest gardens in the country.

We just happen to have an alarming concentration of world-class gardens right in our own backyard. Although we might be shy about the prospect of having stupendous public botanical gardens in the neighborhood, we more than compensate with a glut of gorgeous private landscapes of a jaw-dropping, envy-invoking kind. And-lest you forget-those gardens were firmly hidden behind closed gates at one time. But that was before the Garden Conservancy began its Open Days Program.

Ten years ago, a revelation came to the Garden Conservancy that eventually led to the inauguration of the Open Days Program, a conspiracy between proud garden owners, curious garden tourists and an organization willing to do the legwork to get the two together. What resulted is a spring and summer-long touring schedule with private gardens throwing their gates open for a few hours on a chosen weekend (or weekends). From the very beginning, it's been a win-win arrangement.

Not surprisingly, it started right here. The original organizers were gardeners in this very area, and so the first Open Days in 1995 took place in Connecticut and New York, with 110 gardens involved. But the contagion spread, engulfing many other states (gardens in 20 states currently take part). However, some of the country's most unique and show-worthy landscapes are close to home.

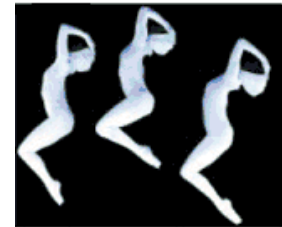
One of the newest gardens to open is in Sharon, where Sally Pettus has been resisting the pleas of groups chafing to tour her garden, waiting until the plantings became mature. In the meantime, she's gradually built the landscape around a complex of buildings that includes her Colonial home, a guest house, studio and sleeping cabin. There's a pool and a pond that feature her bronze fountains (Ms. Pettus is an artist). But the beauty of the experience is that this isn't a vast acreage-although it craftily seems much larger, it's actually two-thirds of an acre on the Sharon green.

"It's an in-town garden beside the historic society, so I benefit from the borrowed landscape," she said.

In addition to the creation of Ms. Pettus, there are many gardens worth a revisit. Most of these veteran gardens are decades old, and we've watched them evolve over the years.

Ever wonder what it feels like from the other side of the fence? When you march determinedly down the driveway toward an open garden, have you ever pondered what it feels like to host the horticulturally-hungry hordes? Apparently, it isn't the least

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bit painful (if you discount the aches prior to, and in preparation for, the grand opening). Don't take my word for it. Witness the legions of landscapes open year after year from the start of the program.

George Schoellkopf of Washington has welcomed the Garden Conservancy crowd from the beginning, and his enthusiasm for the experience remains absolutely buoyant. "I always have a good time," he assured me. "It's this wonderful ego trip. After all, people are coming and enjoying my little baby. It's a thrill." And Mr. Schoellkopf plays to his audience, saying, "I have little things that I've done, and I want to see how they affect people."

They come, they see and they comment. Although some visitors are shy about approaching the gardener-in-residence ("When people walk through and don't say anything, that's frightening," Schoellkopf admitted.), many step right up to shower him with praise. Even more common is the telltale glint of satisfaction. "A nice glazed look is sufficient," Mr. Schoellkopf noted.

Needless to say, the gardens at his Hollister House have changed over the years, even though Mr. Schoellkopf began digging in the Washington dirt over 25 years ago, creating a landscape that has always had a buzz surrounding it. From the beginning, Mr. Schoellkopf had the understanding and foresight to lay firm structure to serve through the decades.

Not only does the property have Old World charm to the point of being totally enchanting, but it has also reaped the rewards of a constant influx of rare plants gleaned from friends and admirers around the world. Long before specialty nurseries were commonplace in this country, Mr. Schoellkopf was bringing home plants from Beth Chatto in Britain. It goes without saying that he's inspired many of us, but he's also educated plenty of locals when their thumbs were just beginning to green up. For Mr. Schoellkopf, the benefits have been boundless. He still covets the rose that a visitor thoughtfully brought when she came. And he even greets the deadline for the Open Days showing from a positive perspective. "It gives the season structure," he insisted. In fact, he's become so enamored of the process that Mr. Schoellkopf is in the process of making Hollister House (circa approximately 1770) and its garden into a foundation, with the Garden Conservancy as advisors to secure the garden for the future.

Although Mr. Schoellkopf is taking steps to ensure his garden's longevity, he definitely does not want it to remain static. The beauty of visiting gardens year after year lies in the opportunity to watch them evolve. And a garden is always changing. Gael Hammer's garden in Washington has progressed palpably over the years since he became part of the initial Open Days Program ten years ago. Under an acre in size and therefore along the scale of the average house lot, Mr. Hammer's garden is anything but ordinary. Not only is it riveting, but it's transforming as well.

What visitors to the first showing saw was a secluded white garden, perennial borders and a porch with a decidedly botanical bent. For most of us, it was a presentation beyond anything experienced. But it continues to grow. A man of insight as well as ideas, Mr. Hammer has added everything from planted stone steps to a pool, with a finesse that only he could muster. "The landscape reflects the quirkiness of its owner," Mr. Hammer said in summing things up.

As for his motives, he was candid. "I love to share," he simply said. And it shows. His favorite moment? When the time came to let people in, everything was ready-except Gael Hammer. "I was still in my gardening clothes. I was sweaty, I hadn't shaved and my knees were still dirty," he said. "They loved it." And that response goes hand in glove with the ambiance created by Mr. Hammer, who noted, "I love the sense that everyone feels that they're at home."

And, in this case, you can go home again. In addition to his Garden Conservancy Open Day, Mr. Hammer annually hosts the Tea for Two Hundred to benefit the Northwestern Connecticut Aids Project and the Danbury Interfaith Aids Ministry. Every year, the event is scheduled for the third weekend in July. This year, mark your calendar for July 23, and admission is always sold at the garden gate in addition to advance tickets.

Speaking of gardens that have expanded, Barbara and Charlie Robinson's garden, also in Washington, has increased dramatically since the inception of the Open Days Program. Originally, the garden focused on a rose allée, perennial borders and a moon garden, which are in their maturity now.

But beyond that, the Robinsons have added a woodland garden with water features galore, a color-wheel compass focal point and a tropical extravaganza that simmers in late summer. This year, their project might be of particular interest to visitors-they've added a deer fence of prodigious proportions.

Needless to say, just like everything on the property, the fence and gate system is a testimony to the engineer-extraordinaire in the family. You name it, Charlie Robinson

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will rig it up, with a twist. And for those of us who don't have a mechanical bone in our bodies, he's always nearby to explain the theory and practice of whatever he's invented.

As for Barbara Robinson, she counts the Open Days among her season's highlights. Her reasons for being on hand are not limited to merely making sure that everything is spick and span.

"They all tell you such nice things," she confessed of those who visit. Plus, she gains from the experience, saying, "I learn as much as I inform."

Her only regret? That she can't pop out and see other gardens when doing host duty. Instead, she visits on other Open Days. "As an opportunity to see what can grow in your neighborhood, it's better than any lecture. If you see a plant happy and thriving nearby, you've got a good shot at it in your garden," she said.

Of course, there are always some tense minutes prior to the event. "I worry that they won't come, and I worry that too many will come," she confessed. But in the end, the day is always positive. And it says something about gardeners. Because no matter what the weather happens to be doing, no matter if there's a heatwave or a deluge, the diehards make the trek. For their courage and persistence, gardeners are legendary. "They come," Barbara Robinson beamed.

This year, gardens are open to benefit the Garden Conservancy's Open Days Program in Litchfield County on June 12, 18 & 25. For more information, call the Garden Conservancy at 845-265-5384, send an e-mail to opendays@gardenconservancy.org or see the Web site, www.gardenconservancy.org.

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