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By: Tovah Martin 08/25/2005

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**Litchfield County is blessed by an abundance of good gardens-no lack of well-appointed landscapes here. Pretty places are plentiful, but truly great gardens can't be found on every street corner. And world-class gardens are another matter entirely.**

And that's why George Schoellkopf is teaming up with a group of local "friends" and the Garden Conservancy to preserve Hollister House Garden as a foundation, securing the future of this horticultural treasure and keeping the legend alive. Hollister House Garden really is first rate. Most of Litchfield County knows it as George Schoellkopf's garden on Nettleton Hollow Road in Washington, but Mr. Schoellkopf has always thought of the place as Hollister House, named for Gideon Hollister, the original builder of the pre-Revolutionary War saltbox. It was the unassuming, hunkered-down farmhouse nestled into a hillside just a stone's throw from Sprain Brook that first seduced Mr. Schoellkopf to purchase the property in 1978. At the time, he was a well-known dealer in 18th-century American antiques, specializing in New England pieces, so the venue's magnetism hinged primarily on its deep architectural roots. However, the inherent beauty of the land was definitely not lost on Hollister House's new owner. The split focus between house and garden happened early in the game, spurred by a visit to Gregory Long's garden in Oneonta, N.Y. Not that Mr. Schoellkopf was straying too far from familiar ground when he slipped outdoors. Interested in gardens since his childhood, Mr. Schoellkopf spent his youth trying and failing to garden in Texas. "God didn't want people to garden in Texas," was how he finally rationalized his efforts. "He wanted to grow cactus Himself." Later, during the juncture when he lived and worked solely in New York City, planting wasn't practical, but gardening was never far from his sphere. And that was why, during that Oneonta visit, Gregory Long (who became president of the New York Botanical Garden) urged a book with many glossies of Vita Sackville-West's garden on Mr. Schoellkopf. That book turned the tide for Hollister House. Of course, Mr. Schoellkopf made the pilgrimage to Sissinghurst to see for himself. And, although that British garden of many rooms and white blossoms provided the inspiration for what he designed at Hollister House, Sissinghurst was really just the jumping off point. Mr. Schoellkopf took the concept many steps further. "In Vita's garden, the rooms function very separately," he said of that 1930s garden that is definitely divine and without equal, but your line of vision is confined to whatever "room" you happen to be standing in. In his Washington garden, Mr. Schoellkopf interpreted the concept of romance and surprise in a hide-and-seek sort of design that reveals segments of what is to come as you journey through the landscape. "The parts communicate very tightly, they connect," he said of his goal in creating a dialogue between garden rooms. "You can peek over to your destination." He accomplished his interpretation with firm structure and strong diagonal views. And Mr. Schoellkopf took full advantage of his curvaceous property to add another dimension. His is a garden on many levels. In addition, he played with color boldly and brilliantly, with the final masterpiece being totally, unequivocally American in feeling.

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Few gardens on this side of the Atlantic have the seniority that Hollister House Garden boasts. And using those years to further its mission, the garden now has an impressive collection of mature trees and shrubs balanced by equally ambitious massive perennial plantings.

Wandering the paths is both a seductive and educational experience. Not only has he chosen the very finest appointments for his garden as far as focal points are concerned, but Mr. Schoellkopf is also an astute collector of rare plants. For those who are just learning how to incorporate shrubs and trees into their backyards, walking through the Hollister House Garden provides a stellar opportunity to project what those woody plants might look like in 20 years time.

In brief, the garden is a journey through formal parterres, and down stone steps to a vibrant scarlet border facing its blue counterpart. It ambles seductively into a pool garden and through the doorways in brick walls. There's a garden house and various blowsy perennial borders, each with a singular personality.

The experience is heady, rich and guaranteed to cling in your memory. So much so that when Mr. Schoellkopf began to seek support for his dream of permanent conservation status for Hollister House Garden, he had no problem whatsoever finding others eager to rally around the cause.

Although the garden has begun its transition into becoming a public space, Mr. Schoellkopf will continue to cultivate Hollister House Garden. After all, he still has work to do. Walk around with Mr. Schoellkopf, and he'll show you a path that's being re-thought and a wall that requires enunciation where the vines have grown too vigorously, obliterating some of the brick work. He's still perfecting paradise. His ongoing goal is to polish that garden further into a space worthy of being preserved in perpetuity, making it a resource and haven for the community. In the future, Hollister House will be open monthly during the growing season so that everyone can experience the power and glory of this local treasure. And the Garden Conservancy is helping to make that happen.

Hollister House has been featured on several Open Days hosted by the Garden Conservancy, as well as appearing prominently on other local tours. But in late September, fellow garden-aficionados in Litchfield County will all have a special opportunity to see Hollister House Garden and partake in its beauty.

To launch his new endeavor and celebrate the formation of Hollister House Garden, Inc. (a Connecticut not-for-profit corporation), Mr. Schoellkopf and the board of directors are inviting the community to tea and cakes in the garden Sept. 25 from 1 to 4 p.m. The address for Hollister House is 300 Nettleton Hollow Road in Washington.

As Mr. Schoellkopf said when I visited, "I'm hoping that the community will embrace this garden as their own."

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