

# AMHERST BULLETIN

## Rescuing the landscape: At The Mount in Lenox, Edith Wharton's gardens have been restored to their early 20th-century splendor

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*JOHN SEAKWOOD*

*The dolphin fountain that sits below the mansion was restored along with the garden beds.*

Picnics on the lawn, drives along country lanes, evenings spent with intellectual friends — and gardens — were what Edith Wharton desired when she built her country retreat, The Mount, in Lenox a century ago. She was fed up with New York society's strictures and the formality of opulent summer "cottages" in Newport, so she escaped to the bucolic Berkshires.

Wharton built The Mount and its gardens in 1902 but lived there for less than a decade. In 1911, with her marriage dissolving, she fled to France and sold her beloved retreat. The years at The Mount were productive, however. It was there that she wrote "The House of Mirth" (1905) and "Ethan Frome" (1911) and completed a series of travel articles that became "Italian Villas and Their Gardens" (1904). Proceeds from her books helped finance the construction.

Her gardens were critical to her well-being.

"Decidedly, I'm a better landscape gardener than novelist," she wrote to a friend, "and this place, every line of which is my own work, far surpasses The House of Mirth."

On a tour of The Mount two weeks ago, Laurie Foote, house manager, told a group of master gardeners. "She had two great passions: writing and gardening." Wharton was greatly influenced in her garden design by the Italian and French gardens she knew from her childhood in Europe and by the famous English gardener Gertrude Jekyll.

The Mount is built on a ledge and the four-story white stucco mansion with deep-green shutters sits high above the formal gardens. A visitor's first real view of the gardens is from the expansive terrace outside the main rooms of the mansion that faces east with a view of the Tyringham Hills. Palladian steps take you down the slope to the Lime Walk, a gravel promenade that connects the two main features, the French-style flower garden in a riot of color with thousands of annuals and perennials, and the serene Italian or walled garden in hues of white and green.

Accenting the slope are a dozen *Techny arborvitae* (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Techny') that look like pointed cones. Low hedges of 'Hetz Midget' arborvitae and 'Green Mountain' boxwood create parterres. The Lime Walk consists of 48 European linden trees (*Tilia cordata*) that are pleached, a technique of weaving the branches together to form a dense mass. Lime is the English term for linden.

Foote said Wharton wanted her garden to be beautiful in all seasons. She worked hard to create the structure, the bones of the garden: hedges, walls, fountains, pathways, terraces. Much as she loved flowers, she called them "ephemerals." She designed a color scheme of white and green and lavender overall.

### **Saved from ruin**

After Wharton sold The Mount in 1911, it had a series of owners including the adjacent Foxhollow School for girls, which used it as a dormitory, and the theater troupe Shakespeare & Company. The house and gardens fell into disrepair until a group of Wharton enthusiasts rescued it. It is now owned by the nonprofit Edith Wharton Restoration Inc.

Restoration began in 1997 and was essentially completed by 2006 with the help of a federal grant, state grants, foundation money and private donations. Restoring the gardens alone cost \$3 million.

Visitors to The Mount have grown in numbers since the work was completed, with 40,000 recorded in 2014. There are special events scheduled including private weddings and a large-scale garden sculpture exhibition with modern statues placed in the woods and meadows.

Foote took us first to the Italian garden on the right-hand end of the Lime Walk. Wharton wrote that the essential elements of Italian gardens were evergreens, stone and water. This is a simple, geometric design with quadrants edged with white astilbes with grass in the middle. In the center is a rustic rock-pile fountain surrounded by white wax begonias. White-flowered 'Royal Standard' hostas line the three walls of the garden.

"Don't you feel as if you stepped into Italy?" Foote asked. Yes, but the apertures in the walls also reminded me of cloisters in English cathedrals. Wharton often called this her "secret garden" and it has the ambiance of a place removed from time and noise.

Foote said the walls of this garden had tumbled down, the fountain was broken and it took an archaeological dig by the University of Massachusetts to ascertain the outline of the garden beds.

Luckily most of the stones in the wall had simply fallen behind the original structure. Now the walls are covered again with vines such as Virginia creeper, sweet autumn clematis and climbing hydrangea. The walled garden is the only area where Wharton provided benches. She believed in exercise, Foote explained, and she also wanted guests to stroll through the gardens and picnic on the lawns.

The Italian garden struck a chord with all the master gardeners. When asked later which garden was the best, Jean O'Neil of West Hatfield, president of the Western Massachusetts Master Gardeners, said, "Best? Probably the Italian garden with its great-looking wall and fountain and nooks." She added, however, "My gardening taste is decidedly less formal than all of this."

Judy Gatland of Sunderland agreed. "I liked the Italian garden best, to my surprise," she said. "I think of them as too formal, but the sort of old, moss-covered and sunken aspects of it appealed to me, plus the archway through to what — a walk? — with a view of the marsh. I think if I had lots of money I'd try to get some land where I could do a sunken garden."

### **Garden maintenance**

As we turned to retrace our footsteps along the Lime Walk, Foote pointed out the massive stone foundation of The Mount, clearly visible from this aspect. We passed a planting of 'Miss Kim' lilac, a Korean species that Foote said was chosen in place of Wharton's common lilac because it blooms longer and later than the usual species. It is also mildew-resistant.

Foote said Laura Walton Gardeners of Richmond maintain the gardens three times a week and also make flower arrangements for the house. Wharton staff maintains the hedges and grounds and an arborist clips the lime trees.

At the other end of the lime walk, Foote paused to note the grass steps leading to the south side of the terrace. She said most grass stairs — including the original ones at The Mount — tend to wash out in rainstorms. But the landscape architects for the restoration (Child Associates of Boston) installed Geoblocks, plastic grids into which sod plugs are planted. The plastic forms create a more solid base so the soil doesn't wash out.

Still, rainstorms can wreak havoc. A year ago, a storm that lasted several hours and deposited several inches of rain in the Berkshires caused \$80,000 worth of damage. The gravel walkways were washed into the beds of the Flower Garden. The storm was on a Wednesday and there was a wedding scheduled for Saturday. The staff worked dawn to dusk to rescue the scene.

The formal French-style flower garden has a central rectangular pool with a dolphin fountain. Foote said in Wharton's day, the geyser would spray 25 feet in the air, but the restored fountain has a more modest height of six feet.

Beds of annuals, perennials and shrubs echo the rectangular design.

"Wharton loved cleome, lilies, hydrangeas, delphiniums and dahlias," Foote said. These flowers still grace the garden beds. Other flowers include liatris, 'Tardiva' hydrangea, castor bean (an Edwardian favorite) and *Filipendula rubra* or 'Queen of the Prairie.'

Towering over even the shrubs was a very dramatic yet airy flower: *Thalictrum rochebrunianum* 'Lavender Mist'. Most members of the master gardener group agreed this was one of the most memorable sights at The Mount. Each plant was easily 10 feet tall.

"First the green leaves come, then little tiny lavender flowers appear," Foote said. Each flower is small and delicate but the plants, when massed together this way, make a breath-taking picture.

"The meadow rue was one of my favorite plants," said Deb Jacobs of Leeds. "It shimmered in the breeze with delicacy and grace anchoring the ends of the beds."

There are 2,000 annuals and perennials at The Mount, in multiple hues — the "riot" toned down by sections of white phlox, both 'Miss Lingard' or wedding phlox and 'David' the modern mildew-resistant hybrid. White and pink Japanese anemones will bloom later.

Already dahlias in bold colors were in flower. Wharton's favorite lavender was represented by the thalictrum and by the modern *Geranium* 'Rozanne.' A large stand of Wharton's favorite lilies was in full bloom, including 'Stargazer'.

"I really liked the formal flower garden (though my taste, like Jean's, runs to the less formal side) — with the Lavender Mist meadow rue most impressive, but good color combinations throughout, and beautiful lilies," said Elaine Hyde of Williamsburg.

### **Illustrious guest list**

From the exuberant flower garden, Foote led us to the simple rock garden that cascades down the slope from the terrace. Here — and elsewhere in the gardens — are native ferns. "She liked native ferns and dug them up out of the woods," Foote said.

We then ambled up the grass steps and sloping lawn to the terrace. Long beds of hydrangeas, perennials and lavender-colored annuals line the lawn. Especially noteworthy was a large stand of bottle-brush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*) with its distinctive white plumes.

Sitting on the terrace, eating lunch and sipping iced tea, it was possible to imagine a house party with Henry James, the diplomat Walter Berry, Ogden Codman Jr., with whom Wharton wrote "The Decoration of Houses," and her niece Beatrice Farrand, the first woman landscape architect in America, who designed a kitchen garden for Wharton as well as the entrance drive. Inside, the dining table is set with place cards for these friends.

The gardens are restful, beautifully maintained and definitely worth a visit. I'd like to return in June to see the delphiniums and in the fall to see the Virginia creeper turn red. On a sparkling day, a visit to The Mount is a delight.

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