

GRADUATING WORDS TO LIVE BY  
EDITH WHARTON, THE GARDENER

SPORTS BARS FOR YOU  
COTTAGES' GILDED AGE

# Berkshire

MAGAZINE

MAY



## Flower Power

*Food, Foraging & Family*

STAYS FRESH THP!!  
MAY 2017 \$4.95



[berkshiremag.com](http://berkshiremag.com)

CELEBRATE

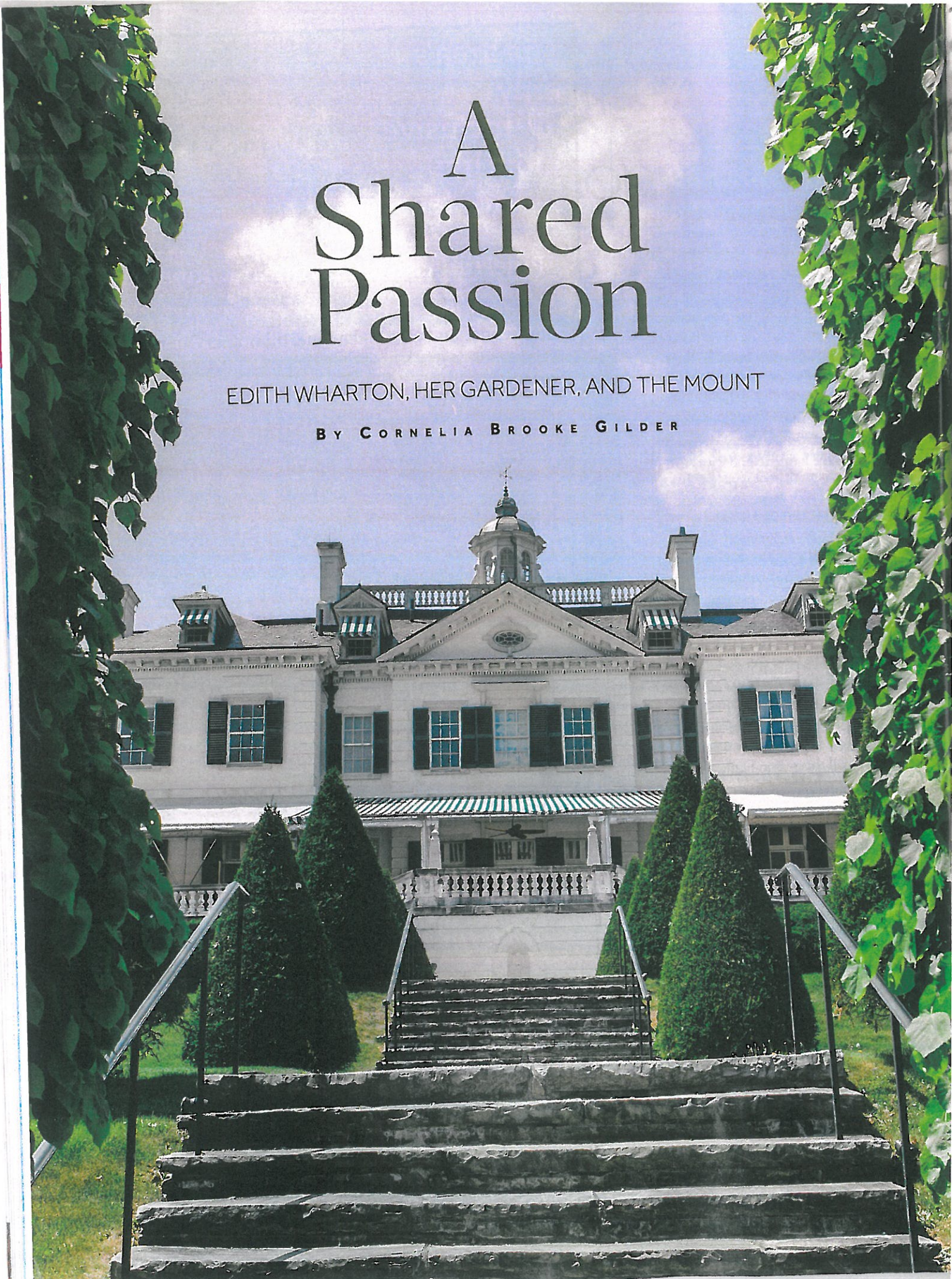
*on page thirty-six*



# A Shared Passion

EDITH WHARTON, HER GARDENER, AND THE MOUNT

BY CORNELIA BROOKE GILDER







**GROWING** Gardening was a lifelong source of joy for Edith Wharton, seen here five years before her death in her last great garden at Saint-Claire du Château, on the French Riviera. c. 1932.



Edith Wharton last drove away from The Mount. But today's visitor can still imagine calling on her as they turn into the graveled courtyard and step into a front hall inspired by an Italian garden grotto—a cool oasis of plaster with a trickling fountain and a statue of Pan of Rohallion, the god of nature.

From the greeting by the Whartons' dapper butler, Alfred White, to sounds of Chihuahuas yapping and skittering on the terrazzo floor in the gallery above and the pungent, summer aroma of bouquets of phlox, arrival at The Mount was a delightful and luxurious experience, and not one confined to the indoors.

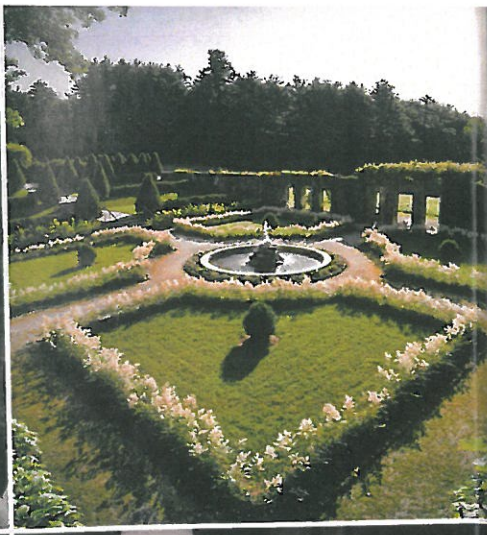
Teddy Wharton, "the most genial of hosts," would be ready to take you down the wild garden path to his new shingled farm buildings and cottage on the lower part of the property near Laurel Lake, and Edith would be brimming with her latest horticultural triumphs closer to the house. For Edith, gardening was a creative passion that competed with her love of writing. When The Mount gardens reached maturity in 1911, she wrote a friend, "Decidedly I'm a better landscape gardener than a novelist, and this place, every line of which is my own work, far surpasses *The House of Mirth*."

Edith Wharton's collection of horticultural books (returned, now, to the shelves of The Mount after nearly a century abroad) shows her serious approach. Well-worn copies of *The Horticulturalist's Rule Book*, an 1895 technical treatise by L.H. Bailey; *How to Know the Ferns* (1900) by Theodora Frances Parsons; and *Lilies for English Gardens* (1901) by Gertrude Jekyll are full of her penciled annotations.

In Lenox, Edith joined a community of erudite gardeners. At Twin Elms, the energetic Miss Sargent, from whom Teddy and Edith bought land for The Mount, was grafting hawthorn plants. In 1902, while The Mount was under construction, Harvard's Arnold Arboretum listed her *Crataegus Georgiana Sargent* in the *Botanical Gazette*. At Coldbrook (now part of Cranwell), Charlotte Barnes was redesigning her family garden, and when she and Edith got together, literary houseguests at The Mount took flight. Daniel Berkeley Updike (whose Merrymount Press printed Edith's early works for Scribner's) remembered their "interminable, and to me



**THEN AND NOW** Clockwise from right, Edith Wharton's gardener Thomas Reynolds and his Lenox bride, Eliza Weston, 1914; restored walled garden at The Mount today; Edith Wharton with her dogs Miza and Mimi, 1894; postcard of The Mount in the Whartons' day; Edith's snapshot of Sara Norton and Teddy Wharton, 1905; The Mount as seen from the Flower Garden today; Edith in The Mount library, 1905; restored Lime walk today; and Reynolds's dried, pressed ferns with pencilled identifications.



rather boring, conversations on the relative merits of various English seedsmen and the precise shades of blue or red or yellow flowers that they could guarantee their customers."

Gardening at The Mount had a rocky start. In the fall of 1902, on moving into the newly built house, the Whartons made a big investment in perennials. But the spring was dry, and when they returned in June, they were greeted with a depressing sight. "The dust is indescribable, the grass parched & brown flowers & vegetables stunted ..." Edith wrote her great friend Sara Norton. "In addition, our good gardener has failed us, we know not why, whether from drink or some other demoralization, but after spending a great deal of money on the place all winter there are no results & we have been obliged to get a new man."

Enter M. Thompson Reynolds (1874–1959), a 29-year-old Englishman known as "Thomas." Trained by his father, a professional gardener in Surrey, Thomas had immigrated nine years earlier. He first came to work in Lenox under two top practitioners: Alfred Wingett of Charles Lanier's estate (now known as Winden Hill), and Alfred Loveless at John Sloane's Wyndhurst (now Cranwell). During those years, his horticultural reputation grew as did his cricket skills. For Thomas, becoming head gardener or "superintendent" at The Mount in 1903 was a big promotion. The newly finished gardener's cottage at the gate provided palatial bachelor's quarters. The small (by Lenox-estate standards) greenhouse was near his house, as was the vegetable garden. All aspects of the property—even Edith's 1908 experiment with raising swans—were under his jurisdiction.

He had to work not only with a demanding and creative employer, but also with her many formidable landscaping visitors. Foremost was Edith's niece and frequent visitor, the competent and, to some, intimidating Beatrix Farrand, who was embarking on an eminent career in landscape architecture. Beatrix had already designed The Mount's masterful front driveway, combining an allée of maples with a meandering woodland drive, as well as the kitchen garden, where Thomas and his assistants worked in the parterre and arbors.

Others visitors included George B. Dorr, who supplied Edith with many perennials from his renowned Bar Harbor Nurseries in Maine and inspired her wild garden path of ferns and other woodland plants leading down toward Laurel Lake. Wharton's Stockbridge neighbor, Daniel Chester French, the celebrated sculptor (soon to create the Lincoln Memorial) and an amateur landscape architect was a horticultural sounding board. His wife, Mary, remembered visits to Edith at The Mount. "[W]hen we went to her place, she and Mr.





**The Mount** reopens for the season May 13, joining in Lenox's celebration of its 250th year. An exhibition on the Whartons' relationship with the town debuts at The Mount on June 9, and Gilder will give a talk on July 14 at the launch of her latest book, *Edith Wharton's Lenox* (The History Press). She will also speak on August 19 at Lenox's Gilded Age Garden and Flower Show. [lenox250th.org](http://lenox250th.org), [edithwharton.org](http://edithwharton.org)

French would wander about the grounds, exchanging ideas." The conversations would continue at Chesterwood. "Each new development in our little place, Mrs. Wharton always came to see, and brought her friends to see it—among others, Mr. Henry James ..."

Just three years after Thomas began working at The Mount, Edith gave an ecstatic mid-summer report to Sara Norton "[My garden] is really what I never thought it could be—a 'mass of bloom.' Ten varieties of phlox, some very gorgeous, are flowering together & then snapdragons, lilac & crimson stocks, penstemons, annual pinks in every shade of rose, salmon, cherry & crimson." She delighted in the yellow hunnemannia, the lovely white physostegia, the white petunias fringing the pools, the intense blue delphinium and the purple and white bell-shaped platycodons with its background of hollyhocks "of every shade pale rose to dark red." Edith considered Thomas a rare kindred spirit. She described her return each spring and first walks through the garden with him, "the going over every detail, the instant noting on my part, of all he had done in my absence, the visit to every individual tree, shrub, creeper, fern, 'flower in the crannied wall'—every tiniest little bulb and root that we had planted together!" In those years, The Mount's entries swept up prizes at Lenox's flower shows.

But after the summer of 1907, Thomas could detect his employer's disengagement. The Whartons' marriage was faltering with Teddy's manic behavior and Edith's infatuation with her faithless lover, Morton Fullerton, an American journalist in Paris. In the summer of 1909, Edith never left Paris and Thomas was left to run The Mount for tenants. The following year, Thomas, anxious about his future, gave Edith notice. One wonders how aware Edith was of Thomas's other ties to Lenox, including his role in the elite community of English- and Scottish-born gardeners. She and Teddy supported his cricket team with awards, and must have followed his ascent through the ranks of the Lenox Horticultural Society. Did she know of his attachment to Eliza "Lily" Weston, a willowy nurse, whose brother-in-law was the superintendent of the nearby Elm Court? Thomas and Lily would marry in 1914.

By then, the Whartons had sold The Mount, and Thomas was, through Beatrix Farrand's recommendation, in charge of Drumthwacket (now the New Jersey Governor's residence), a 48-acre estate in Princeton with a garden, inspired by the very same one in Italy, at the Villa Gamberaia, as The Mount. Here, Thomas Reynolds took up his work amidst balustraded terraces, twin stairways, niched fountains, grottos and even swans—all reminders of his days with the unforgettable Edith Wharton. ■

Marge Cox and Anne Schuyler of The Mount contributed to this story.