

Focus on **UNTERMYER GARDENS**



STONE GRIFFIN STATUES guard the amphitheatre at Untermyer Park's Greek Garden in Yonkers.

Photos by Marisol Diaz

WELCOME TO YONKERS, GREECE

One hundred years ago, Samuel Untermyer had 60 gardeners working in 60 greenhouses on the lush gardens of his Yonkers property overlooking the Hudson River.

He grew thousands of varieties of plants, including more than 3,000 types of orchids. There were two ancient Roman columns, a swimming pool decorated with mosaics of sea creatures, rock gardens, waterfalls and the world's only living sundial. Every Tuesday, he would open the garden to the public and once, in 1939, more than 30,000 people visited the 150-acre paradise.

Mr. Untermyer — a famous lawyer and German Jew who led a boycott of Germany in the early 1930s and was called "Hitler's bitterest foe" — purchased the estate, called Greystone, between North Broadway and the Hudson River in Yonkers, in 1899. By 1912, famed architect William Welles Bosworth had grown gardens over 150-acres.

During Mr. Untermyer's lifetime, the gardens were some of the most celebrated in the country. After his death in 1940, they fell into limbo.

Now, a handful of workers maintain the ruins, which were turned into a public park decades ago. Few people know it exists.

But the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, a non-profit created by Riverdalian Stephen Byrns, is working with the City of Yonkers on a restoration. And the conservancy has enlisted the help of Marco Polo Stufano, who was the longtime director of horticulture at Wave Hill, as an advisor.

On a recent weekday afternoon, the gardens were empty, except for some runners and bikers. The centerpiece of the park, the Greek Garden, was empty except for the presence of horticulturist Timothy Tilghman, who is leading the restoration project from the grounds.

"Come in!" Mr. Tilghman shouted from across the garden.

Standing in the shade of two massive Weeping European Beech trees, Mr. Tilghman, his hands caked in dirt, pointed out the Persian, Roman and Greek influences on the garden's high walls, amphitheatre, Corinthian temple and canals.

"Nobody knows this is here," he said, smiling. But that wasn't always the case.

Yonkers acquired some of the land in 1946



CANALS run near the Corinthian Temple in the Greek Garden.

and another chunk in the 1990s. Today, Untermyer Park is 43 acres of wilderness and ruin, except for the breathtaking Greek Garden on which Mr. Byrns' Untermyer Gardens Conservancy started focusing last year.

Mr. Byrns' calls the garden "America's greatest forgotten garden."

The Greek Garden's view of the Hudson River and Palisades is similar to the view from Wave Hill, but for now, the appeal of Untermyer Park is

to imagine what was.

Mr. Untermyer built the world's only sundial made of living things by using an evergreen to cast a shadow on meticulously arranged flowers. According to a story that appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1940, the dial was even rearranged to account for daylight savings time. Mr. Untermyer said any perceptive person could use it to tell time within five or six minutes.

On a recent afternoon, Andrew Geni and Joe Spano, both Yonkers environmental maintenance workers, gave an unofficial historical tour. They had used photos from the 1930s to find the spot where the sundial was planted, clearing away the brush and searching for days. They eventually came upon a large ring of pipe, which Mr. Geni said he believes was used for the dial's irrigation.

Mr. Spano is a self-described history buff who said his motto is "you have to know where you work." While walking around the property recently, he talked about how John Lennon visited the garden; he showed off the dilapidated and graffiti-covered gatehouse where Son of Sam used to hang out; and he spoke admiringly about the garden's creator.

"His wife said she wanted a garden, so he built the [Greek Garden]. His daughter wanted to get married, so he built this," he said, pointing to the most impressive rock garden on the property, the Temple of Love.

The temple, imported from France, has an iron cupola of interweaving hearts atop six columns on a small mountain of rocks. A waterfall once gushed from the rocks, but now there's only a small stream after a good rainfall.

"You could be here forever finding the paths he made," said Mr. Geni, standing on a rock path,

which now allows visitors to see The Temple of Love from another viewpoint. Mr. Geni is known as the "pathologist" because of his talent for uncovering dozens of rock paths on the property.

Mr. Untermyer had two ancient monolithic Roman columns installed at the bottom of a giant staircase leading to a clearing where visitors can see the river. The columns are still there, albeit with the name "Vick" spray painted below them.

"There's nothing like it in the Western Hemisphere," Mr. Byrns said about the columns. "You go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and there's nothing like that there."

The staircase and the loggia were designed in the same proportions of Villa D'Este on Lake Como in Italy.

Mr. Byrns referred to the architecture, much of which has survived, as the garden's bones.

"It has great bones. So if you can take the great bones and plug in world class horticulture ... it will be a pretty amazing combination," he said.

Walking back up the staircase toward the Greek Garden, the sides are overwhelmed by bamboo. It's a jungle that the workers have just begun to clear away.

But if you look hard enough, you can see six levels of gardens, three on each side of the staircase.

"We're hoping to make it what it was," Mr. Geni said.

The Untermyer Conservancy will host a series of tours on Saturday, June 16, from noon to 4:30 p.m. Please meet at the 945 North Broadway parking lot. The suggested donation is \$5 and children under 12 are free. Attendees should wear sturdy shoes. For more information and a complete list of tours through August, go to www.untermyergardens.org.



TWO ANCIENT monolithic roman columns overlook New Jersey at the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy.