



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Inside the entrance to Untermyer's Persian garden.

Seeds of change bring back 'forgotten garden'

By Jackie Lupo

YONKERS — Nature will have its way. That's the first impression visitors get when touring the 43 acres of Untermyer Park in Yonkers, now undergoing one of the most ambitious garden restorations ever done in the United States. Thanks to the efforts of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, what was once one of the finest private gardens in America is gradually being brought back to its former glory. The awe-inspiring walled Greek garden has been painstakingly replanted in the first year of the Conservancy's efforts. But beyond the walls, the rest of the property awaits its turn, hoping for new infusions of cash from donors.

The Conservancy was established a year and a half ago by architect Stephen F. Byrns of Riverdale, who calls Untermyer Park "America's greatest forgotten garden."

An avid garden enthusiast who spent 10 years as a director of Wave Hill, the 28-acre restored garden a few miles to the south, Byrns had long been familiar with the Untermyer property. He revisited the site a couple of years ago, when he was told that



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Paul Manship's sphinx sculptures atop two columns.

the City of Yonkers had gotten the fountains in the walled garden working again. "I went back and was blown away. I fell in love with it again," Byrns told the Enterprise.

Byrns, who had served on the New York City Landmarks Commission for six years, "was ready for a new challenge," he said. Around that time, he was visiting the gift shop at the historic house at Montgomery Place in Annandale-on-Hudson, and picked up a brochure of important landscapes along the Hudson, published by New York State. Untermyer Park had been omitted.

"Yonkers is always getting short shrift," he said. "[The brochure] had gardens five percent of the importance that this is, and miles away from the Hudson River, and this really ticked me off."

Byrns spread the word among fellow enthusiasts and established a nonprofit organization to raise money to restore the gardens. He reached out to Marco Polo Stufano, one of the "rock stars" in the gardening world. Stufano had designed the gardens at Wave Hill, and agreed to come out of retirement to

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become the Conservancy's horticultural adviser, on a pro bono basis. Initial donations allowed the Conservancy to hire veteran horticulturist Timothy Tilghman, who had managed the gardens of a large private estate, had been a horticultural staffer at Wave Hill, and had worked as senior garden editor at Martha Stewart Living magazine. Working with Stufano, Tilghman shepherded the replanting of the walled gardens with hundreds of shrubs, perennials, and annuals in a style that was faithful to the original designer, William Welles Bosworth. Tilghman has also begun to tackle the Herculean task of removing 70 years of overgrowth to reveal Bosworth's vision. It's a job that is part gardening, part archaeology.

"Our group is mainly about horticulture, so what we have been doing is a huge amount of planting," said Byrns. "Marco Polo Stufano and Timothy Tilghman bring the highest level of sophistication to the design. And it's being maintained beautifully."

Meanwhile, the City of Yonkers has been doing restoration work on the architectural elements of the garden. Matching grants from New York State have enabled the City to repair the fountains and to restore some of the magnificent mosaics. The Conservancy hopes to raise enough money for deer fencing so that they can extend their planting efforts beyond the walled gardens. When the gardens were originally planted, deer were not the problem they are today.

The Conservancy's work has attracted attention (and donations) from a host of local garden lovers, including many from the Rivertowns. Meg Walker, a Hastings village trustee, is on the board of directors of the Conservancy.

"I've always been curious about the Untermeyer Gardens and I really had no knowledge of its history," Walker told the Enterprise. "When I went on the tour I was astonished at the extent of the original garden and the fame and beauty of the original. People came from all over the world to visit this garden."

Walker said the restoration work would take years. "It's going to evolve over time," she said, adding that people have been hearing about the Conservancy's efforts and have been sending photos from their grandparents' era of the gardens in their original state. She said that a restored garden could be a great tourism destination for Yonkers, and could also be used to train gardeners and horticulturists.

"We would love to see them use the space in a variety of ways," she said. "In some respects, the architecture is more beautiful than what you find at Wave Hill."

Byrns told the Enterprise that there have been many local donors, including the Irvington Garden Club and the Thursday Club. This week, Josyane Colwell, owner of Le Moulin Catering in Irvington, will join the Conservancy board.

Today, Untermeyer Park, which is just south of St. John's Riverside Hospital, is less than one-third the size it was 70 years ago. Part of the former estate is now occupied by the hospital, while other parcels have given rise to unremarkable apartment buildings. But what's left is enough to give visitors an inkling of how the very, very rich lived in another era.

Attorney Samuel Untermeyer bought the estate, known as Greystone, in 1899. The previous owner was Samuel Tilden, a former governor of New York and loser to Rutherford B. Hayes in the presidential election of 1876. Untermeyer was a German-Jewish millionaire and partner in the law firm Guggenheimer, Untermeyer & Marshall. He was famous for being the first lawyer to receive a million-dollar fee



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The amphitheater

for a single case, and for his trust-busting activities. Later in his life, Untermeyer was one of the first to speak out against Adolph Hitler's treatment of the Jews in 1930s Germany.

Untermeyer paid about \$170,000 for the property and proceeded to put millions more into the house and gardens over the years. He hired Bosworth, a noted landscape designer, architect, and sculptor, to redesign the gardens. Bosworth was trained at MIT and had worked in the office of Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmsted. Among Bosworth's other famous projects were the Cambridge, Mass., campus of MIT, the gardens of the Rockefeller Family estate Kykuit in Pocantico Hills, and the reconstruction of Versailles, outside Paris, after World War I.

By the time Untermeyer died in 1940, there was not a corner of his 150-acre property that had escaped his notice or the ministrations of the dozens of gardeners he employed. Always on the lookout for talent, Untermeyer would scan the newspaper for notices of incoming steamships from Europe and would send agents down to the docks to meet the ships, seeking steerage passengers with gardening experience.

Untermeyer lived at Greystone for four decades and kept working on his garden all his life. The wooded areas were designed to surprise and delight. Meandering pathways revealed classical statues, small buildings or "follies," and rare specimens of trees and shrubs. Thirty thousand European hybrid rhododendrons were planted in every color, giving the impression of clouds of whites, pinks, lilacs, and reds. In the spring, 50,000 tulips bloomed against a carpet of 50,000 pansies. Then there were the flowerbeds, organized into several "color gardens," each with a dozen or more different varieties of flowers planted in one color, stretching down toward the Hudson. A sundial made entirely of flowers told the time.

In the property's 60 greenhouses, each temperature- and humidity-controlled, Untermeyer's gardeners grew annuals and perennials for the house and grounds, but there were so many blooms that he also sold them to local florists. He and his staff were avid horticulturists, developing



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One of the water channels looking toward the Persian garden's temple.



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The Medusa mosaic inside the temple overlooking the Palisades.

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new cultivars of flowers, such as a hybrid delphinium, and a salmon-colored salvia that was a cross between red and white. His hothouses grew melons and vegetables for winter, and dwarf peaches, nectarines, figs, and tropical plants. He grew about 3,000 exotic orchids, and was never without one in his buttonhole. His chauffeur would drive down to Manhattan from Greystone at noon to replace his wilted morning boutonniere.

In its heyday, Greystone was famous for its beauty and the lavish lifestyle of its residents. In 1923, expressionist dancer Isadora Duncan performed in the outdoor theater. Her appearance was typical of the entertainments Untermeyer staged for his guests. But although Untermeyer could never have been described as “a man of the people,” he did open his gardens to the public every Tuesday. In October 1939, 30,000 people — many coming from foreign lands or traveling from across the country — attended a

free flower show at Greystone, clogging traffic on Broadway and making it necessary to bring in police to control the movement of sightseers around the gardens. According to a report in the *The New York Times*, “Both Mr. Untermeyer and his son, Supreme Court Justice Irwin Untermeyer, walked through the gardens and mingled with the crowds.”

Towards the end of his life, Untermeyer tried to reach an agreement with the State, the County or the City of Yonkers to turn his entire estate into a public park to be kept in perpetuity as he had maintained it. But he did not have enough cash to leave an endowment large enough for Greystone’s upkeep; in fact, he had numerous discussions with urban planner Robert Moses about the future of the property, and had told Moses that he was spending \$75,000 to \$100,000 a year to maintain it. Moses predicted that he would have a hard time getting anyone to agree to keep the property together without Untermeyer coming up with an endowment of at least \$1 million.

Within a few years of Untermeyer’s death the estate was split up. The 29-room, Second Empire-style mansion was

demolished. The contents of the house were sold, along with some of the statuary from around the property. Some of the plantings ended up at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. Parcels of the land itself were sold off, leaving intact only the central 43 acres from Broadway, around the walled garden, down to Warburton Avenue. It became the property of the City of Yonkers, which used it as a public park. The walled garden area was simply maintained by city workers, without the profusion of flowers that had graced the garden in Untermeyer’s day. The park was sometimes used for civic events and theatrical performances. But for 70 years, the landscape beyond the walled garden reverted to nature. Brush and invasive plants and vines took over the walking paths and flowerbeds, destroyed masonry structures, and hid the waterworks and rock gardens around the Temple of Love (the waterworks were recently rediscovered by an Eagle Scout doing cleanup work in the area).

The restoration of Untermeyer Gardens, potentially one of the great gardens of the world, is a monumental task. If the Conservancy succeeds in raising what it

would eventually need to completely restore the property, the cost may well run into the millions of dollars. But the payoff could be huge in beauty and pleasure for millions of visitors.

Tomorrow (June 16), guided tours will be ongoing, noon-4:30 p.m., except in case of rain. A \$5 donation is requested for each individual on the tour; children 12 and under are free. Tours will also be given on selected Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays through late August (visit www.untermeyergardens.org for a complete schedule). Dogs are not permitted on the property. For those who prefer to wander the grounds on their own, the walled garden is open Monday-Friday, 7 a.m. to sunset, and Saturday-Sunday, noon until dusk, except on holidays. The rest of the park is open daily, dawn to dusk. The main entrance, 945 N. Broadway, Yonkers, is immediately south of St. John’s Riverside Hospital. Visitors can also enter the gardens from Warburton Avenue, about a half-mile south of Odell Avenue. Park on Warburton Avenue opposite the heavy wrought iron gates and walk up the rustic carriage trail.

Points of View

FROM THE EDITOR

Resurrecting Untermyer

Untermyer Park is a place of beauty and tragedy, like the ruins of an ancient city.

There is beauty in the vistas and in the remaining structures that overlook the Hudson River and the Palisades. Some of those spots boast romantic names, like the Temple of Love and the "thousand stairs" that descend to a landing that includes a pair of Roman columns over 2,000 years old.

Untermyer's centerpiece is its Persian garden, which is surrounded on three sides by walls and turrets. Walking through the garden's main gate, under the sculpture of Artemis, Goddess of the Hunt, is a calming experience that helps visitors forget the bustle of the neighborhood outside the walls.

In words, it's easy to list the Persian garden's distinctive features, such as the water channels, the fountains, the temple with the Medusa mosaic, the sphinxes atop two columns, the amphitheater, and the elaborate tile work. Words, however, fall short of describing the feeling of being there in person, as do the photos that accompany the story on Page 3.

The tragedy of Untermyer is the deterioration of the property since its namesake's death in 1940. Nature has reclaimed areas where elaborate gardens and greenhouses once attracted thousands of visitors. Much of what remains has been worn by the elements, damaged by vandals, and fallen into disrepair due to a lack of upkeep.

The good news, however, is that the restoration of Untermyer is underway. Thanks to the fund-raising efforts of the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, a full-time horticulturist has spent the last year cleaning the property and adding plantings to the Persian garden.

The City of Yonkers, which owns the park, has also contributed to the effort. Yonkers' resources, however, are limited, as evidenced by the recent budget battle over cuts to the city's workforce.

Untermyer's future depends on the conservancy's ability to raise money through donations, grants and events such as the tours happening tomorrow, June 16, between noon and 4:30 p.m. The suggested donation for the tour is \$5 per person.

While the park is free to visit, the campaign to restore it is worth supporting. Untermyer was once a landmark attraction. It has the potential to become that again, similar to Wave Hill in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. For that to happen, millions of dollars must be raised. Maybe that's an impossible goal. Maybe not.

Last Saturday, while photographing Untermyer, I was told by horticulturist Tim Tilghman that attracting visitors to the park is an important step in the fund-raising process. The park, he said, sells itself to those interested in supporting its restoration. After lingering far longer than intended, I understood what he meant.