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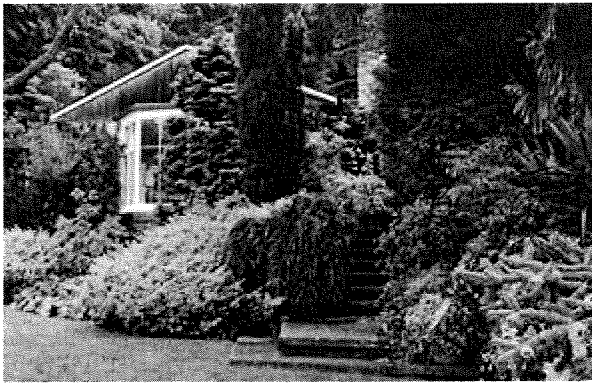
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Historic Northwest gardens are always changing, yet they endure

Historic Northwest gardens always changing, yet they endure. “These historic gardens are so important to our culture, our aesthetics, and they make us aware of the web of life.”

By Valerie Easton

Special to The Seattle Times



EVERY GARDEN is rich in its own ecological history. It takes only a year or two for most plants to bloom, fruit and spread about. Trees grow taller, their roots spread wide and deep, birds and creatures leave their mark. Gardens are change agents, constantly renewing themselves through this interaction with the surrounding world, with sun, soil and weather.

There are other factors vital to a garden's well-being over time. The quality of the

design, the skill of the gardener, how well the garden suits its site, and how spectacular, or not, that site is.

But the questions for any property filled with living, growing, pulsating plants, microbes, insects, remains the same. How can a garden endure when its basic nature is change? What does a garden become when it outlasts the original vision of its creator(s)?

The challenge for Washington Park Arboretum curator Ray Larson lies in balancing the needs of a living museum against the park's long and distinguished history.

“I try to think about the larger character of the place, how we can keep the ‘Olmstedian’ feel of it, while recognizing that all gardens are continuously in a state of change — planned or not,” Larson says.

Luckily, we have a national organization dedicated to the preservation of exceptional gardens. The only Garden Conservancy garden in these parts is the Chase Garden in Orting. Tanya DeMarsh Dodson, coordinator of the Garden Conservancy Northwest Network, explains why it's special.

“The Chase landscape embodies a post-World War II design aesthetic in such an elegant fashion,” she says. “It's been well-maintained and has an amazing setting.”

The GCNN supports historic gardens with funding and expertise, including the Dunn Gardens in North Seattle, PowellsWood Garden in Federal Way, Soos Creek Botanical Garden in Auburn and Lakewold Gardens in Lakewood; all are open to the public.

“These historic gardens are so important to our culture, our aesthetics, and they make us aware of the web of life,” says Dodson.

The answers to the mystery of longevity lie in gardens that have survived and thrived for many decades. Because landscapes are 3-D and all about site and light, you have to visit to find the clues. If you aren’t feet on the ground, walking the paths, smelling the air, soaking up the atmosphere, it’s like reading a script rather than seeing the play.

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