

Norwich Resident's Work Honored by The Garden Conservancy



Lombardy poplars, a variety called 'Thedes,' visually divide Bill Noble's garden from the fields and hills beyond. Noble is fond of repeating plants, including here filipendulas, Joe-pye weed and peegee hydrangeas, along with tall purple barberries and blue *Browalia americana*. (Marion Brenner photograph)



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Unlike many garden authorities, Norwich resident Bill Noble did not start his career by going to college to study plants and serving as apprentice to a gardening pro.

He moved to the Upper Valley in 1976 with degrees in history and classics and a desire to work with his hands in a community. After a stint as an organizer with Listen Community Services, and as a woodworker, he found a niche in the soil.

“While working as a cabinetmaker I began a small market garden and put my community organizing skills to work by helping to start the Cornish Farmers Market — the first one in 1982 or so,” Noble said. “I loved growing plants and bringing them to market, selling directly to people who wanted the produce, and eventually expanded to grow 10 acres of vegetables, first in Cornish, then in Windsor. I marketed through a farmstand in Ascutney, the Cornish Farmers Market and wholesale. But I found it hard to make a living, and put farming aside.”

His interest in gardening became a career when he found a way to combine it with his interest in history. “I had an Aha! moment when I discovered the field of historic gardens and garden preservation,” Noble said. “I was lucky enough to be offered an internship at Saint-Gaudens (National Historic Site in Cornish) to help restore the hedges. That’s when I started learning about horticulture, garden design and garden history.”

Noble’s career as a garden designer and consultant has been an illustrious one, and he has received a new honor: The garden at his Norwich home has been featured in a new book, *Outstanding American Gardens: A Celebration — 25 Years of The Garden Conservancy*.

Fifty gardens from around the country were selected for the book, each of which has been on display through The Garden Conservancy's Open Days program — which is in itself an honor. Noble's garden is the only one from Vermont, New Hampshire or Maine in the book.

The brief text in the book notes that Noble's gardens consist primarily of flowerbeds, and that "Bill's goal is to have horticultural interest in his gardens from May to October." It also calls the two-acre garden Noble's "laboratory, his canvas on which to combine different leafy pictures."

Growing up in Norwalk, Conn., Noble spent time playing in the woods and around old stone walls, but said he had no particular interest in plants or gardens.

He went to Beloit College in Wisconsin, where he studied history and classics and then earned a master's degree at the University of Toronto with the idea of continuing on to a career in academia. He lived on a farm outside of Toronto while studying at the university, and realized that he was not cut out for an academic life.

After his first decade in the Upper Valley, trying out different jobs, the internship at the Saint-Gaudens National Historic site set him on his long course in garden design.

"I learned on the job and was offered a more permanent position and restored the formal garden and revitalized other parts of the landscape at Aspet (the Saint-Gaudens estate) over the next five to six years," Noble said. "That was a big break for me, it was 1986, I think. I dug into the history of the gardens and used historic photographs and garden plans drawn by Ellen Shipman (a noted early 20th century garden designer and landscape architect) — I sought out old cultivars of hardy perennials that had once been in the garden and learned how to garden to create the effect I saw in the photographs and in Shipman's plans."

After working at Saint-Gaudens he went on to work at The Fells, the former home of 19th century politician John Hay, under the auspices of The Garden Conservancy, then in its infancy. Since that job was only part time, he also developed a garden design business, focusing on restoration of old gardens in Cornish and Hanover.

Along the way, he took classes in horticulture and garden design at Garden in the Woods, in Framingham, Mass., and Radcliffe Seminars, getting a certificate in the gardening arts from the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University.

Then, some 20 years ago, Noble went to work at the Garden Conservancy in Cold Spring, N.Y., as its director of preservation, work that took him to celebrated gardens around the country.

"It was my job to identify significant American gardens that had the potential to be saved and become public gardens," Noble said. "I was responsible for helping to craft a strategy for each of them so they could flourish beyond the lifetime of the people who made them. And in some cases I oversaw or participated in the restoration of historic gardens such as the gardens of Alcatraz. It was a great opportunity to work with extraordinary gardeners and plants people, professionals and avid gardeners, in all parts of the country."

In addition to Alcatraz, he also worked on the Hollister House Garden, in Connecticut, among many of the others that The Garden Conservancy has improved in its 25-year history. Working on so many historic gardens furnished Noble with a host of ideas that have influenced his home plantings.

When Noble and his partner, Jim Tatum, a longtime and now emeritus professor of classics at Dartmouth College, bought their home in Norwich in 1991, there was a limited budget for plants — and as yet a limited knowledge of garden design.

"I learned by my mistakes," he said. "For instance, I viewed everything beyond the (original) flower garden as 'not garden,' so I planted screening too close. I didn't have a drawn out plan."

That came later. Currently the gardens continue far beyond the original flower and vegetable beds.

The lawn, garden and orchard occupy a little more than two acres of the 22-acre former farm, which also has 10 acres of field and 10 acres of woods.

“The garden is mostly organized around the house, barn, trees, stone walls and barn foundations that I found here,” Noble said. “It utilizes some of the features of Cornish gardens, such as the Lombardy poplar allee at the edge of the field. As I mentioned, the garden is somewhat autobiographical, it includes the big flower garden inspired by Shipman’s flower garden designs; a rock garden made while I was working at The Fells and cared for that rock garden; a dry garden also inspired by Clarence Hay’s work at The Fells; Silver and Gold garden inspired by new gardens I’ve admired in the Pacific Northwest which feature plants carried back from my travels working for The Garden Conservancy.”

Noble is a collector of plants, accumulating several examples of the genus of plants that he likes. Over the years he has gathered a variety of plants including willows, hellebores, phlox and delphinium, along with Himalayan plants such as Saxifrages and Primulas, rhubarbs, grasses and sedges.

His garden also reflects his love for green in all its shades. He likes groundcovers, junipers and grasses — plants with bold foliage — all of which lack dramatic blossoms and bright colors. What one perennial flower does he like best? Feather reed grass, a variety known as ‘Karl Foerster’ of the species *Calamagrostis acutiflora*. He noted that it holds its beauty longer than almost any other species, and that it was still beautiful in his garden earlier this month.

Instead of focusing on just a flower blossom, he is interested in “the whole plant and how it responds to the soil and the place.”

For a showy blossom, Bill likes an intersectional or Itoh peony hybrid called ‘Garden Treasure.’ Intersectional hybrids are crosses between perennial peonies and tree peonies, retaining some of the characteristics of each. So they are cut to the ground each fall but have stiff stems that do not flop the way perennial peonies tend to do. And, like ‘Garden Treasure’, they often exhibit yellows — a petal color not seen in ordinary peonies. A mature intersectional peony hybrid can display up to 50 blossoms, blooming in sequence over a 30-day period.

Many of the perennials in Bill’s garden are quite large in summer. He has worked hard to improve the soil, adding compost and a bagged organic fertilizer, Pro-Gro, every year. The plants also benefit by the lack of weed competition. And he noted, “My garden has also benefited from being made on a former farm where the heavy soil was improved over the years with the addition of cow manure.”

Because Noble’s gardens are open to garden groups and for the conservancy’s Open Garden Days, they have to be tidy at all times. Up until recently, his office was in Clinton, N.Y., more than 3 hours from Norwich, and he also traveled extensively around the country. So for many years he has had Sue Howard of Thetford work one day a week in his gardens.

“She has been a huge help. She’s an excellent garden designer and has a great eye, and attention to detail; we complement one another extremely well,” he said.

But Noble, now 63 years old, still likes to work in the gardens himself. “I try to work three days a week in the garden in the spring, and then I can slack off in the summer.”

Inclusion in The Garden Conservancy’s book is a big honor, he said.

“It showcases some of the best gardens in the country, especially the eight preservation projects, all of which I have had something to do with professionally,” he said. “A number of gardens that are widely considered to be among the best in the country are included in the book, such as the Ruth Bancroft Garden, Hollister House Garden and Peckerwood Garden. And private gardens that I have emulated for years, such as the O’Byrne Garden, are also included.”

This honor isn’t the first such recognition Noble’s garden has earned: It has been featured in The New York Times, House and Garden and Martha Stewart Living, and has been entered into the Archives of American Gardens at the Smithsonian.

For more information about Bill Noble’s gardens, see his website, www.billnoblegardens.com.