Not-So-Secret Gardens

A preservation program offers the public a look at some extraordinary private grounds.

By BARBARA WHITAKER

WINDING up an dirt road not far from the Saw Mill Parkway, a visitor could easily miss Rocky Hills, hidden behind a 6-foot-tall redwood fence and simple gated entry.

But at least once a year, the gates — closed most of the rest of the time — are thrown open to the public, revealing a garden 50 years in the making.

Acanthus and Buddleja alternifolia, eyes left sides and lane walkways flanked by seemingly endless banks of forget-me-nots. A Cypress magnolia hold court in one area, while a flowered tree peeks through in another. A small pond is lined by yellow iris, pink primrose and leafy horta, and Clematis weave through a tree.

And that’s just a sampling of what can be seen in this eight-acre wonderland turned into a wooded neighborhood made up of homes ranging from simple frame houses to grand estates.

Henriette Sutro, 90, a retired decorator, and her husband, William, an art conservator who died in 1964, began working on the garden shortly after they bought the property as a weekend retreat in 1960. For the last 12 years, Mrs. Sutro has welcomed the public as part of the Open Days program of the Garden Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving extraordinary gardens.

On the last Sunday in May, nearly 250 people visited Rocky Hills for a fee of $8. A police officer directed traffic as drivers parked their cars along the wooded lane leading to the gate.

Dressed in a broad-rimmed straw hat and comfortable clothes, Mrs. Sutro greeted the visitors as they entered, answering their questions in a soft, low voice.

It was the second Open Days event this spring at Rocky Hills. The first was on May 6 when about 400 visitors came to view thousands of tulips, daffodils, Muscari, alliums and wood lilies blooming in bloom.

When the Sutros bought the property more than 50 years ago, they were not looking for a place to garden. What they wanted was a weekend residence within an hour of where they lived in New York City.

"It was a decent house and a nice piece of land," said Mrs. Sutro, whose home overlooks much of the eight-acre garden. "There was nothing here, aside from few big trees and the brook."

A gardener already worked the property regularly, but the Sutros began tending to the place, adding plants as they went along.

"One didn’t analyze it," she said. "One just kept doing."
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The Garden Conservancy’s Open Days program provides free admission to selected gardens. These gardens are open to the public for free on specific dates, and visitors can explore the unique and diverse landscapes that these gardens have to offer. Whether you are an experienced gardener or a casual visitor, the Open Days program is a great opportunity to discover new gardens and learn from experienced gardeners.

The gardens featured in the Open Days program are chosen based on their unique characteristics, such as rare plants, rare species, or innovative design elements. Visitors can also learn about the history and horticultural practices that have shaped the gardens over time.

The Open Days program is not only a great way to discover new gardens, but it is also a way to support local gardening organizations and promote the art of composting. Gardens that participate in the Open Days program receive donations that help to maintain and support the gardens.

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