



Susan Farley for The New York Times

Not-So-Secret Gardens

By BARBARA WHITAKER

MOUNT KISCO

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

But at least once a year, the gates — geared more to keeping out deer than people — are thrown open to the public, revealing a garden 50 years in the making.

Azaleas and rhododendrons cover hill-sides and line walkways flanked by seemingly endless banks of forget-me-nots. Rare magnolias hold court in one area, while flouncy tree peonies bloom in another. A small pond is lined by yellow iris, pink prim-

rose and leafy hosta, and clematis weave through a tree.

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

Henriette Suhr, 90, a retired decorator, and her husband, William, an art conservator who died in 1984, began working on the garden shortly after they bought the property as a weekend retreat in 1956. For the last 12 years, Mrs. Suhr has welcomed in 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 275 peo-

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

ple visited Rocky Hills for a fee of \$5. 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. Suhr 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 hyacinth in bloom.

When the Suhrs 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. Suhr, whose home overlooks much of the eight-acre garden. "There was nothing here, aside from a few big trees and the brook."

A gardener already worked the property regularly, but the Suhrs began tidying up the place, adding plants as they went along.

"One didn't analyze it," she said. "One just

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LIVING LEGACY

Henriette Suhr, 90, in the eight-acre garden at her home, Rocky Hills, in Mount Kisco. Though the garden is private, it opens to the public occasionally, through a program sponsored by the Garden Conservancy, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving exceptional gardens.



Photographs by Susan Farley for The New York Times

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GREEN DAYS

Top to bottom: Visitors toured the grounds of Henriette Suhr's home, Rocky Hills, in Mount Kisco on two dates last month through the Garden Conservancy's Open Days program. Terry Karpen now cares for the gardens that a fellow landscape designer, Douglas L. Maclise, spent 12 years creating at his home in Redding, Conn., before his death in 2002. Alexandra Leighton, also a landscape designer, maintains a garden on her 20-acre property on Long Island. It will open to visitors on June 10 as part of the Open Days program; the Maclise property will open on July 21.

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fixed up the garden."

Like many weekend gardeners, they visited nurseries and purchased what they liked. But both Suhrs came to the task with an artistic eye, which perhaps explains how two people with no real background in horticulture could create such a masterpiece.

Mr. Suhr was a renowned art conservator; the works he cared for included old masters paintings at the Frick Collection in Manhattan. Mrs. Suhr, a graduate of Parsons School of Design who specialized in home furnishings, is particularly known for her work developing Bloomingdale's furniture show rooms.

"We had a point of view," Mrs. Suhr said, referring to the aesthetic appreciation she and her husband shared.

They also had a mutual love of nature. Mr. Suhr was an avid mountaineer, and they spent much of their time traveling.

The goal at Rocky Hills, she said, was simply "to beautify the place."

They learned about plants through books and by visiting nurseries. They struck up relationships over time that led to some of their garden's unique features, including a collection of rare magnolia trees — some of them experimental and never named — from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's Kitchawan Research Station in Ossining. When the center was closed, a friend who worked there gave Mrs. Suhr some of the trees that were being developed.

"We never made a design," she said of the garden. "It just grew this way."

Eventually, in 1977, the Suhrs left Manhattan and made Rocky Hills, a comfortable, two-story shingled house, their permanent home. After her husband's death, Mrs. Suhr decided to stay on the property and continue developing the garden.

Mrs. Suhr has been active in the Garden Conservancy since the group's earliest days. She was one of the first participants when the organization started the Open Days program in 1995 at the urging of Page Dickey and Penelope Maynard, two accomplished Westchester gardeners themselves. Inspired by a similar program in England, they began by coordinating the opening of 110 private gardens, including their own: Ms. Dickey's in North Salem and Ms. Maynard's in Bedford.

At first, all the selected gardens were either in Westchester, Dutchess or Putnam Counties in New York or in Connecticut. But the program grew quickly. Now there are about 350 private gardens open to the public across the country, with dozens in New Jersey and on Long Island among them.

"Some of these Open Days are attracting crowds in the thousands," said Laura M. Palmer, director of the program.

Ms. Palmer said the Open Days not only allow members of the public to enjoy the beauty of



gardens previously hidden behind gates, but also highlight preservation work that is under way around the country. For example, the conservancy is now restoring gardens on Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay and at the home of the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay in Austerlitz.

For gardeners, the Open Days program provides an opportunity to give back.

"I like the Garden Conservancy — it attracts a lot of true gardeners," said Alexandra Leighton, a garden designer whose 20-acre property in St. James, on Long Island, will be open on June 10. "This gives me an opportunity to make a contribution."

The visits raise money for the conservancy, but often result in another type of sharing.

"It's a really wonderful opportunity for people to swap ideas and plants," Ms. Leighton said.

Each year about 50 percent of the gardens that participate in the Open Days program are new to it, Ms. Palmer said. (Some of the gardens do not open to visitors annually.) She said the participating gardens attract about 75,000 visits a year, with some people visiting a half-dozen gardens.

In New Jersey, Edith Wallace of Glen Rock, and her husband, Gordon, often plan their vacations around garden tours. Mrs. Wallace said she has visited more than 60 public and private gardens in the metropolitan area, and has traveled with her husband as far as Texas and California to attend Open Day events.

"People do ask me what it is that makes me go," said Mrs. Wallace, a retired professor who taught anatomy and physiology at William Paterson University in Wayne, N.J. "I went to one, and it was great, and then another and another. It's just snooping in people's back yard."

For Mrs. Wallace, who has used her retirement to hone skills in botany, the tours also provide fodder for lectures she gives to local garden clubs. One of her favorite subjects is visiting gardens in the metropolitan area.

"Every garden needs an audience," she said. "What good is it if nobody comes to see it?"

To some extent, that was the question that helped open the doors of Stone Orchard, a garden designed by Douglas L. Maclise at his home in

Redding, Conn. Mr. Maclise, a landscape designer who spent 12 years creating the garden before his death in 2002, had worked on more than 100 gardens in Connecticut.

When Terry Karpen, the landscape designer who now cares for the property, asked the current owner if she might be interested in opening the gardens to the public, she initially declined. But eventually she agreed, considering it the best way to maintain Mr. Maclise's legacy, Ms. Karpen said.

At Stone Orchard, which will participate in its first Open Day on July 21, visitors can explore his work amid the three acres of woodlands, brooks, meadows and lawns, which also feature unique stone walls and terraces. Over the years, he collected hundreds of unusual trees, shrubs and plants.

ONLINE: IN BLOOM

For a slide show of gardens in the region that are part of the Garden Conservancy's Open Days program, go to nytimes.com/intheregion

Ms. Karpen was at Rocky Hills in late May to seek inspiration for the gardens she now tends.

She gazed at a rock garden, one of the most recent additions, where a small collection of ferns nestled into a backdrop of delicate yellow corydalis poking from cracks in a stone wall.

"Life can't get any more perfect than that corner over there," Ms. Karpen said. "I think when you go to a garden that has all the elements it should, there's the same satisfaction of viewing a perfect work of art," she added. "It's transforming in a way that inspires you."

Timothy Tilghman, a former garden editor at Martha Stewart Living and an advocate for public gardens, works full time on the property and gets help from volunteers, including Westchester master gardeners.

"We weed by hand here," Mrs. Suhr said. "I don't allow hardly any pesticides, and our lawns are taken care of organically."

Mrs. Suhr's gardening may have started out as a hobby, but it has ended up as her life's work. When gardens are added now it is with an eye toward education. The rock garden, for example, is meant to help visitors learn about plants that require less water, said Mrs. Suhr, whose garage studio is filled with thousands of gardening and horticulture books and periodicals that she has collected.

The Garden Conservancy is overseeing a deal guaranteeing that after Mrs. Suhr's death Rocky Hills will be donated to the county, which will be responsible for maintaining the property as a public garden and resource center.

"It's very important culturally for this country to understand and appreciate gardens as living works of art," Ms. Palmer said, noting that preserving gardens like the Suhrs' is also important because of the constant loss of land to development. Since 1989, the Garden Conservancy has helped preserve nearly 700 acres, including properties ranging from the one-acre Elizabeth Lawrence garden in Charlotte, N.C., to 156 acres at the Fells in Newbury, N.H.

As part of Mrs. Suhr's education effort, she is putting together a collection of dogwoods to demonstrate the various types that are thriving since a disease claimed so many of the trees on the East Coast.

"This place is her love, her passion," said Ted Kozlowski, Westchester's county forester, who has worked with Mrs. Suhr. "She's a rare, rare person." Mrs. Suhr has been involved with environmental groups for many years and long believed that the property should be preserved — even before the garden became the focus.

"I feel a great responsibility," she said. "I'm very pleased nobody can build anything on here."

"The garden is going to look different over the years. I know that. Every time a tree goes it changes the whole landscape," she said. "But even if it's not going to stay the same, I hope the spirit of the place will be preserved."

Where the Flowers Are

The Garden Conservancy's Open Days program invites visitors to the following Westchester County gardens on the dates listed. Tickets are \$5 and can be purchased at each garden.

Additional information about the program, future dates and descriptions of some of the participating gardens are available by calling (845) 265-5384, or online at www.gardenconservancy.org.

JUNE 10

Gardens of High and Low Farm, 649 South Bedford Road, Bedford, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Gardens of Keith and Susan Kroeger, 621 Guard Hill Road, Bedford, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Gardens of Michael and Katherine Takata, 100 Little Town Lane, Bedford, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Gardens of Phillis Warden, 531 Bedford Center Road, Bedford Hills, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Gardens of Vivian and Ed Mermin, 2547 Maple Avenue, Cortlandt Manor, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Gardens of Carol and Jesse Goldberg, 22 Wallace Road, North Salem, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Gardens of Page Dickey and Francis Schell, 23 Baxter Road, North Salem, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Gardens of Keeler Hill Farm, 64 Keeler Lane, North Salem, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Gardens of Barbara and John Schumacher, 315-317 Crow Hill Road, Yorktown, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

JULY 22

Gardens of Phillis Warden, 531 Bedford Center Road, Bedford Hills, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Gardens of Michael Fuchs, 33 Reyburn Road, Katonah, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Premium Pond Garden, 10 Pryer Lane, Larchmont, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Gardens of Hilltop, 122 Nash Road, North Salem, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Gardens of Fran and Alan Zimbar, 91 Penn Road, Scarsdale, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.



TWO FOR THE ROSES Edith and Gordon Wallace of Glen Rock, N.J., visiting the garden of George Sternlieb in Short Hills this month during an Open Days event.