

Rudyard Kipling once said, “Gardens are not made by singing ‘Oh how beautiful’ and sitting in the shade.” Certainly Rocky Hills, the garden of Henriette and the late William Suhr, didn’t achieve its Foundation for Landscape Studies 2009 Place Maker Award with the owners lounging beneath a tree. Once called a “wonderland” by the *New York Times*, Rocky Hills was created by the love of two people and the discovery of their passion for plants, nature and the environment.

Henriette Granville Suhr was born in Vienna, Austria. Her family moved to France, where she attended and graduated from the Parsons Paris School of Art and Design in 1937. She then moved to the United States in 1941.

Upon her arrival in America, Henriette went to work for Macy’s and then Lord & Taylor. But it was at Bloomingdale’s where her classic style and vision set a standard; she designed model rooms to display and sell furniture, showing customers what they could recreate in their own home. Her suggestion that bath towels be displayed by color rather than make was at the time groundbreaking. She revolutionized the way we decorate our homes.

In the mid-1950s, the Suhrs purchased Rocky Hills, in Mt. Kisco, N. Y., as a weekend retreat. Here their love affair with landscaping began. Henriette and William, a renowned art conservator, began converting the 14-acre old farm into one of the leading private gardens in the country. It would become their full-time home in 1977.


Henriette states that they had no formal plan for their land and they really did not know very much about garden design. They simply bought plants they liked and placed them where they felt they would look good, and in combination with other plants they thought might go together. If a plant didn’t work in its first spot, they simply moved it to another location. The couple learned by trial and error in the garden and by reading books and visiting botanical gardens and nurseries.

William passed away in 1984, but Henriette soldiered on, lovingly tending to Rocky Hills. She abhors weeds and likes the garden to be kept neat and tidy. She prefers orderly landscaping but appreciates natural and wild areas as well. For instance, she and her visitors can’t help but enjoy the forget-me-nots, though they spread themselves about.

Henriette says she loves seeing the rebirth of the garden in spring and she finds the first snowdrops very exciting. She likes shades of blue, but not necessarily shades of yellow. Despite that fact, she treasures the five yellow *Metasequoia* given to her by friend Marco Polo Stufano. She had to think about it a bit, but she found just the right place for them along the woods, where they brighten a somewhat dark area. She also favors azaleas and rhododendrons but admits that dogwoods are her favorite flowering tree. In fact, she has an alley of dogwoods.

Henriette describes herself as an artist inside the home and out. She says she was pretty successful in her first career; in retail, she was the one in control. She says gardening is different however—Mother Nature is the one in control.

Henriette wants to ensure that Rocky Hills remains undeveloped. Therefore, in 2000 she announced plans to donate the property to the Westchester County Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation. The Garden Conservancy, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving extraordinary gardens, agreed to hold a conservation easement on her property. Her goal is that Rocky Hills be utilized as a horticultural education center. A Friends group was established under the auspices of the Garden Conservancy to develop programs and ongoing support for Rocky Hills as a public garden and education center. For now, public access to Rocky Hills is limited to designated open days.

Henriette knows the garden will not likely remain just as it is. What’s important to her is that it remains green—or, better yet, shades of blue—for future generations to enjoy and learn from, as she and William did. 

Henriette Granville Suhr

by MARIA ZAMPINI ~ photograph by MARIA ROBLEDO

