

“A sublime garden in the forested hinterlands of upstate New York”

is how English garden historian Tim Richardson begins his description of Innisfree Garden in his book *Great Gardens of America*. It’s a “singular place...of richly interwoven vistas and episodic energies....” Another English authority, *Hortus* editor David Wheeler, who visited Innisfree in 2013, was so smitten he wrote, “Like the pyramids of Egypt or the Great Wall of China, Innisfree helps us to define what we mean by ‘civilization’.”

After such praise, it’s tempting to write “*fnis*.” But the story of Innisfree’s making, from 900 acres rising around a glacial lake 80 miles north of New York City to 185 acres of richly imagined landscape—Rockefeller University bought the rest for its Ecosystem Studies branch—is as “singular” as the garden we see today.

Innisfree emerged from a chance meeting at a Harvard lecture in 1938. Marion and Walter Beck, she an heiress and plant maven, he an artist and intellectual, were researching garden concepts for their Innisfree estate; Lester Collins was finishing his undergraduate degree in English. The Becks had already built a grand Queen Anne-style house (demolished in 1982) when Walter discovered, in scrolls at the British Museum, the designs of Wang Wei, an 8th-century Chinese poet, painter, and garden builder. Influenced by Capability Brown’s romantic revisions of landscape and Wei’s sense of a garden’s evolving mystery, Walter began nudging the rocky terrain into Wei-inspired vignettes, or what he called “cup gardens”—a moss-covered boulder, a misting waterfall. Lester Collins soon became the stabilizing force that would turn Beck’s dream into a finely executed place of wonder.

Despite his youth, Collins brought a bedrock of scholarship and experience to his collaboration with the Becks. Before becoming a Harvard dean in 1954, he’d traveled throughout Asia; obtained his master’s in landscape architecture; served in the British Eighth Army’s ambulance corps during WWII; and helped translate the 1,000-year-old *Sakuteiki*, a Japanese text advocating the study (not the imitation) of great gardens. For nearly two decades he was a principal in the Washington, DC, firm Simonds and Simonds, where his projects included work on the Smithsonian’s Haupt and Hirshhorn gardens, the latter a redesign of the controversial Beaux Arts original.

All the while, and until his death in 1993, Innisfree remained on Collins’s drawing board (although he preferred on-site design). He and the Becks shared a commitment to balance and fluid movement through a garden’s space. And the men were steadfast complements:

Collins’s imagination was grounded while Beck’s was rambling and evanescent. As Petronella Collins, Lester’s widow, commented years later, “Mr. Beck was always coming up with new philosophies.”

The Becks’ deaths in the 1950s and Innisfree’s opening to the public in 1960 brought necessary adjustments. Collins set about extending paths and unifying the “cups” into a symbiotic experience for visitors. Not least, he oversaw the dredging of the garden’s heart, 40-acre Tyrell Lake; today’s Pine Island materialized out of the excess muck. Berms were added and boulders repositioned. To the meadow cup, Beck’s last installation, Collins added a ribboning stream wide enough to reflect nearby larches and magnolias.

Making design look natural presupposes a modesty guiding the fashioning hand. Collins was preternaturally modest. He’d come from a family of successful fruit farmers in New Jersey, and Harvard (with a dose of Bauhaus) only strengthened his opposition to the solidity and predictability of the monumental and formal. Add to this his esteem for maintenance, the dogged, dirty kind, and you have understood Collins’s essentials. He considered mowing almost an art. (“Whoever mows must be a perfectionist [with] intuition.”)

Walter Beck’s signature cup, The Point, features Turtle, Dragon, and Owl, rocks moved from other parts of the garden to anchor the lake’s western shore. Opening the view toward Pine Island and, barely visible, the Channel Crossing footbridge, they are favorite objects of contemplation from chairs set under 125-year-old oaks on the rise behind them. Photo by Oliver Collins; courtesy of Innisfree Garden





INNISFREE:

Maintaining the Dream

by **Lorraine Alexander**,
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Innisfree's landscape curator, Kate Kerin, a graduate of Cornell's MLA program (and member of the Garden Club of Orange and Dutchess Counties) goes further; she considers "revolutionary" the sustainable maintenance Collins practiced. "He had a genius for intervening in the natural succession process, working with different ecosystems for specific aesthetic effects." A storm-damaged tree might be taken out—or reevaluated as sculpture. When deer found the lower branches of a weeping hemlock irresistible, the tree was allowed to glory in its "eccentric" appearance.

Maintenance geared to economy is commonplace, but Collins also employed it in the service of biodiversity. He made gardens from the lake's peripheral wetlands at a time when many people would have filled them in. Aware of their critical role in filtering and controlling runoff while providing habitat for birds and insect-eating vegetation, he literally waded into the natural bog-making process, weed whacking and pulling up debris by its roots. Grasses, rose mallow, and native blue iris flourished—"but suddenly," says Kerin, "they were garden-esque."

Keeping the lake's depths healthy proved particularly complex. When unsightly algae began to bloom in the 1940s, Collins devised—two decades before the algae-bloom cycle was understood scientifically—a pump system to remove decomposing organic matter, effectively starving the algae. (He also stopped the use of traditional fertilizers, another algae food.) The water passed through soil and rock up to a seven-acre reservoir the Becks had installed on the property's western edge. There the resulting "compost tea" was further aerated, then sent via fountains and waterfalls back down to the lake.

Fall foliage at
Innisfree. Photo by
Lorraine Alexander

Terraces that once led
to the Becks' house
now provide relaxing
interludes for visitors
and a way up to one
of two water jets
at Innisfree. Photo
by Oliver Collins;
courtesy of Innisfree
Garden



Flowers at Innisfree are secondary to landscape. As Collins unapologetically wrote, "Independence of bloom is a hallmark of Innisfree." Still, flowers—among which, 125-and-counting catalogued species of wildflowers—contribute their casual beauty. Water lilies and lotuses take turns adorning the lake. Near the meadow are two floral cups: a bank covered in daffodils, succeeded by sweet peas in summer; and, on steep Dumpling Knoll, a mantle of painstakingly established daylilies, which, Collins felt, added vitality to balance the grass berms and terraces.

No maintenance program can stand without pest control, and although Innisfree's healthy ecosystems are its foremost defense, emergencies occur. Phragmites, an aggressive grass, ruins bird habitat and, by extension, flyways. Innisfree meets the attack by injecting an herbicide into *each* plant stem. A similar tactic halts purple loosestrife, isolated plant-by-plant with sections of PVC piping. Japanese knotweed is weakened and eventually eradicated by the broader stroke of weekly cutting.

Such care is rare anywhere. But "Innisfree is like no other garden," says Charles Birnbaum, founder of the Cultural Landscape Foundation and past coordinator of the NPS's Historic Landscape Initiative. It is nothing less than a "thoroughly original masterwork."

