

# Interview with the Stewards of Rocky Hills, Barbara and Rick Romeo

The finest gardens in the world will wither and slowly transmute into a semblance of what was—until Nature recovers completely what was hers. Decades, if not generations of effort, can and will be lost. Fortunately, in the case of a garden, loss can be avoided if the right people and the right measures are in place.

Rocky Hills is well-known and appreciated by friends of the Garden Conservancy. Lovingly tended for decades by its equally well-regarded owner, Henriette Granville Suhr, and her husband, William, the garden sits in Westchester County, NY, north of New York City. It was a living, layered, multi-dimensional representation of a mid-twentieth century design ethic.

Sometimes gardens age better than people. We all get to a point in life where things we used to do become difficult and complicated. When that happens, the “What’s next for this place?” question gets asked about the spaces we create. So it was with Henriette.

The Garden Conservancy, dedicated fans of Rocky Hills, and the parks department of Westchester County were not about to let this work of horticultural art be lost. A conservation easement, one of the Conservancy’s signature preservation tools, was arranged to protect the property and its future. The easement was transferred from the Conservancy to the Westchester Land Trust after Henriette’s passing, and a short time later, the property, with the easement in place, was sold to Barbara and Rick Romeo, long-time friends of Rocky Hills and nearby homeowners.

For many years, the Romeos had volunteered at Rocky Hills to help Henriette manage Garden Conservancy Open Days. Now they have owned the property for more than four years and are actively involved in garden preservation and garden stewardship. Garden Conservancy President

James Brayton Hall and Director of Preservation Pamela Governale spoke with the Romeos about stepping into a property with a long history, and with legal restrictions that impose certain responsibilities.

## How did you come to be involved with Rocky Hills?

**Barbara Romeo:** We’d lived down the street for 30 years. I was walking by one day and Henriette was standing at the gate. She waved to me and I waved back. She invited me in.

I just thought it was so stunning. It was like a fairyland in here. It was spring; the forget-me-nots were all over the place and the azaleas were just opening. To me, it was incredibly beautiful. There is something about this place with so much depth and texture.

I was invited to be on the board of the Friends of Rocky Hills when the garden was headed toward becoming a Westchester County park. We aimed at preparing it to become a public garden. During the garden’s Open Days, 200 to 300 people would come through at times, talking about what they got out of seeing a garden like this and the ideas that they were taking home with them. It was just a wonderful, wonderful introduction to the garden.

**Rick Romeo:** The garden became so loved and well-regarded by so many people that there was some sense of relief while it was in a “pre-park” situation. Henriette was in her 90s when the county had to back out of that idea. Then there was a lot of concern until her death at age 98: what’s going to happen with Rocky Hills without the cushion of a large institution, a county organization, to keep it as a park. What’s going to happen to the garden? It’s not everybody’s cup of tea to come into a preexisting garden with a conservation easement that inhibits one’s freedom to do whatever you want to do.



It is not a typical thing to handle [a property] with a view toward preserving, maintaining, and continuing.

**Speaking of easements... what have you learned about conservation easements that you wish you had known before purchasing the property?**

**BR:** The easement is held by the Westchester Land Trust and they have been absolutely wonderful to work with. They come out once a year to monitor the easement and they have given us some good tips. We understood that we would never be able to divide the property. The Land Trust also has to be very careful about the watershed; water flows through this garden and into a public reservoir. That's their second priority. Number three is removing invasive plants as much as possible. And number four was not to cut new paths through the area. We walked into ownership with eyes wide open. We knew exactly what was expected.

**RR:** A lot of people might view an easement as a burden or a restriction. I view it as consistent with what we would have done here anyway. It's kind of a guide, rather than an enormous burden that I might feel constrained by. An easement may bother people in the abstract, but, as a practical matter for us, and in terms of the way we approach this place, it's seamless.

**The easement requires a certain number of opportunities for the public to experience Rocky Hills. How has that worked out?**

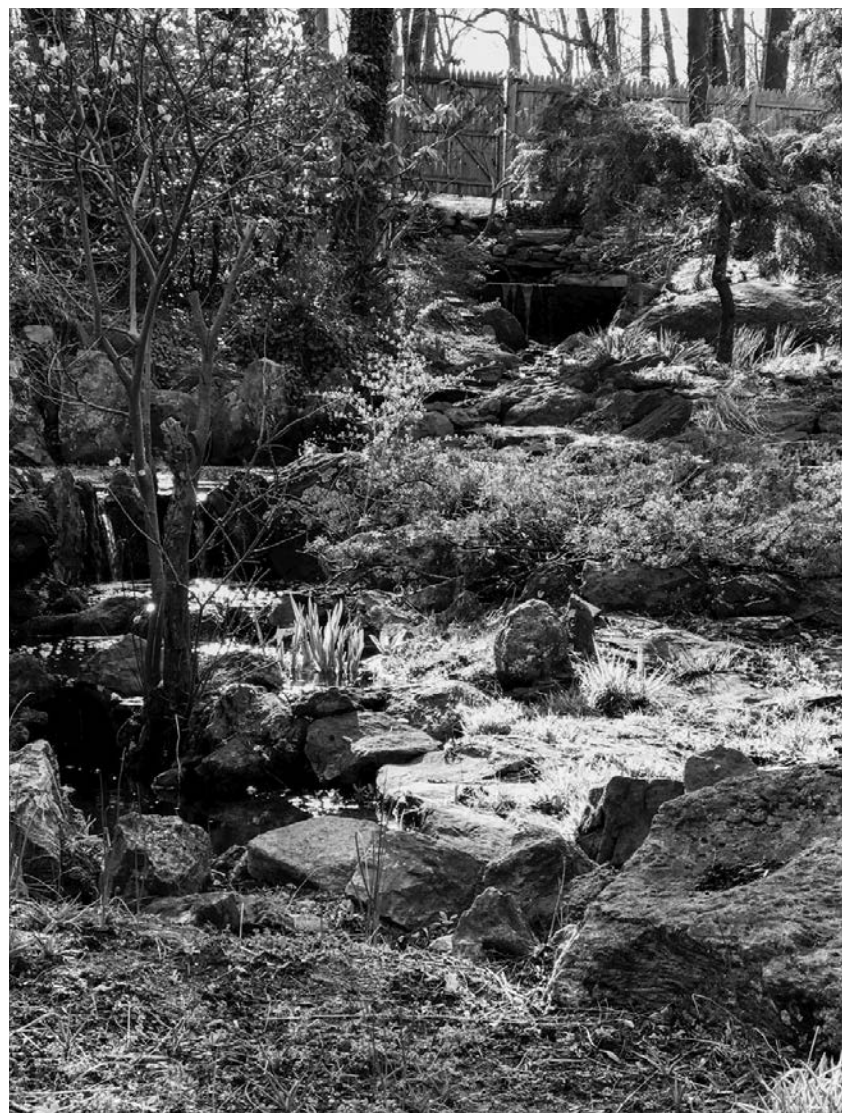
**BR:** We participate in the Conservancy's Open Days program. When we opened for our first Open Day, it rained all day. The people who came were hardy gardeners, many of them Master Gardeners themselves, and had wonderful questions. We loved doing it; what a nice group. They identified some things for me that I did not know and I tagged along to hear their observations and got a little better educated.

**What have your biggest challenges been?**

**BR:** It's very, very different and it's pretty daunting to take over somebody's 60-plus year old garden, one that's been beautifully planted by people who had a very creative way of planting, and of looking at plants and at design.

**RR:** A whole lot of gardening that has nothing to do with plants. Structural things, especially when dealing with an older garden. Fencing, for example. They call it "deer fencing" because it's supposed to keep the deer out. Well, in the last couple of weeks we've had a number of incidents where they figured out ways to either jump over or squirm under it. An extensive sprinkler system is now old; when you turn it on in the springtime after winter, there are geysers here and there. A lot of non-plant maintenance is needed to preserve infrastructure, which leads to preserving plants because you don't want the deer to eat them and you want plants to be irrigated.

**BR:** One plant challenge is dealing with invasive plants. Another is "native versus non-native," which we could debate for the next three hours. Invasives are sometimes a problem with plants that were purposely planted here 20 or 30 years ago. There are barberries (*Berberis*) down in the woods, which we've been removing. An even bigger problem is burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*), which was once planted and maintained, but now is all over this place. They are beautiful, but I spent last summer digging them out of the fern garden, digging them out of the perennial garden, digging them out of the woods. 2021 is the year; we're just getting them out of here. There's no halfway with them. And then there are pachysandras, English ivy, and vinca all over. We're going to replace some of these aggressive non-natives with native plants. Henriette was aiming in that direction when she was still here and that's important to us.



Barbara Romeo used black-and-white photos of the garden to explore the architecture of the trees and plants and the interplay of textures in the plantings at Rocky Hills.

**How are you handling the design of the garden, its look and feel?**

**BR:** Another challenge of being an owner maintaining this property is that the color palette was meant to span the aesthetic between the manicured landscape and the naturalistic. There was a naturalistic bent; for the most part, there are no straight lines here; it definitely wanders. You have to pick your spots because there's certainly a lot to do without trying to create new places to work on.

**RR:** We also wound up moving lots of things around. Some plants were meant to be small, but they have grown quite large and overwhelming.

**BR:** Everything Henriette planted, she wanted to look full immediately, especially when garden groups were coming through. With our prior land, our idea was that you put something in and we'd wait. Henriette couldn't do that. She would put in what she considered to be dwarf plants. But in fact, they had nothing to do with dwarf plants! Her idea was that, in a year or two, you pull them up and move them somewhere else. She really wanted the garden to always look full and ready. So, yes, we've moved a lot of plants around.

**Now that you know this garden so intimately, what do you consider its most important elements?**

**BR:** There are a lot of structural elements to the trees and plants. It's not just about flowers; it's about the whole look of the place. When you're looking out, you'll see a palette of



color, but I also went out and took black and white pictures of the garden because I love the interplay of so many of the plantings. It's all about the ones that aren't just unusual, but lend shape to the landscape and take your eye places that you really want to go.

**RR:** There is such a splash here in spring. No question, prime time here is May into early June. We are here in the summertime, so we have invested in having that splash of color continue into summer and early fall.

**BR:** Watching the seasons change is wonderful. We came back in March and the winter aconites were everywhere—seas of yellow flowers as soon as the snow melted a bit. And then you roll on to the spring bulbs, forget-me-nots and the azaleas. It's one thing after another to the point where I walk out the door only to rush back and tell Rick, "Look! This just opened. Look at these. These have just come." It is an unfolding that goes on. The fall is just gorgeous. There are so many trees here that turn color. I like the Camperdown elm (*Ulmus glabra* 'Camperdownii') in the front better in the winter because you see incredible shapes that are usually hidden under the leaves. I have a friend who is an artist down the street and I have asked her to sketch it for me.

#### **What makes you happiest here in this garden?**

**BR:** Walking out every single day and seeing something different. Constant change, seeing something new spring up. I grow a lot from seed. I love doing that. Rick and I also love

the vegetable garden. Just being outside every day. It is a healthy lifestyle and I think it is good for you. Even on rainy days, we are still out here doing things.

#### **Do you have any advice to others?**

**BR:** To me, it's all about keeping the spirit of Rocky Hills and its past. We knew the garden. I mean, you think you know it until you actually own it, but we did know what we were walking into. If someone had taken over without having known the garden and wanted to continue it, the learning curve might have been steep. Make sure you really, truly understand, that you know what the spirit of the place is BUT, if you have the spirit to do it, for heaven's sake, do it!

You do have to pick your spot. Mother Nature is going to do things. You know you're going to have storms, perhaps more and more. You're going to see insect invasions and fungus and things like that. And we do have climate change happening. So you have to pick your battles to some extent.

I also want to thank the Garden Conservancy immensely for its help, for your documentation of the garden, and for the historical information you gave us. Because of you and Henriette we have a history of everything, everything she bought, including all the tree peonies. We know when they were bought, where they were from, and all their names. It's been a huge help.