

Preserving Gardens that Spring from the Soul

By Lucinda Brockway

Nestled into the Berkshire hills not far from the Garden Conservancy headquarters, Naumkeag is one of America's cultural treasures and one of its most renowned Massachusetts gardens. Here, creators Fletcher Steele and Mabel Choate believed that garden making was a fine art, and pushed the limits of color, line, form, and horticulture as they molded their masterpiece. As biographer Robin Karson wrote, "Fletcher Steele made gardens as playgrounds for people's imaginations." Certainly, Naumkeag reflected this lavish garden theater: from the moon gated-wall of the Chinese Temple garden to the birch-bedecked Blue Steps, the magnificent views of the Stockbridge mountains offered a dramatic backdrop to Steele's stage. Sometimes the magic of a garden, however, is not evident to everyone. When The Trustees was approached to accept Naumkeag as a bequest, one member of the Standing Committee vehemently argued against its acceptance, writing, "It isn't an old house, it isn't a beautiful house, and it has one of the most horrendous gardens in the Commonwealth... I really can't see why The Trustees should take over this white elephant of a house."

Many years later, long after Naumkeag did, in fact, come to The Trustees, retired president Gordon Abbott, Jr. wrote a history of the organization that included our foray into garden preservation. "Preserving gardens," he wrote, "presents a special set of problems. Landscape gardens such as those at Naumkeag... derive their character from their design. Given sufficient funds, technical knowledge, labor, and, of course, an understanding of the original design concept and an appreciation for its subtleties, they can be maintained with

relative ease." After having recently restored Naumkeag's gardens, I might question the "relative ease" part of his statement as we continue to polish this masterpiece and determine the tools necessary to guide stewardship decisions in the future.

As we continue to steward Naumkeag, we are also challenged to rejuvenate two very personal gardens in North Andover and Beverly, MA, where historic records have been uncovered only after hours of diligent research, and the personal development of the gardens had to be understood and translated to master planners and organizational leaders. Abbot recognized these two gardens and their specific challenges as he wrote, "But it is the personal gardens such as those at Long Hill and the Stevens-Coolidge Place, whose poetic charm has come from the special interests, tastes, and sensibilities of an individual, which present the greatest challenge. For these are characteristics that spring from the soul and are not easy to institutionalize." Certainly, this is the challenge of garden preservation: how to understand, guide, and institutionalize "gardens that spring from the soul" so that their inherent genius of people and place can continue to inspire under the umbrella of their legacy.

Each time the Garden Conservancy accepts a conservation easement on a garden property, it is pledging to ensure the easement's preservation goals are maintained—in perpetuity. Part of shouldering that responsibility involves establishing a relationship with the garden owner (either



Above: Long Hill, Beverly, MA, Terri Unger Photography
Right: Stevens-Coolidge House & Garden, North Andover, MA, photo by Coco McCabe **On opposite page:** Fletcher Steele's (1885 - 1971) Blue Steps at Naumkeag, Stockbridge, MA. All photos courtesy of the Trustees of Reservations.





a nonprofit organization or a private individual) and creating resources for stewardship of the garden, such as management plans and records that document the garden's special qualities or its "conservation values." This is much like the suite of documents we at the Trustees of Reservations are developing to inform site stewardship and protect core features at garden properties that we manage.

Each time we establish a garden preservation easement, we build documents that guide its long-term management, a suite of documents to inform site stewardship and protect core features. Managing change is foundational to garden preservation. Gardens are dynamic and very personal heritage sites, filled with plants at various stages of youth, maturation, and decay. To preserve and protect what makes each one unique, guiding documents must specify how much change is acceptable. They must accurately defend features or plant collections sacred to the core spirit of the garden. Most importantly, they anticipate where, how, and at what pace, change will occur. As gardens transition from private to public spaces, they adapt to welcome and accommodate visitors, provide parking, ticketing systems, visitor services, staff workspaces, and appropriate interpretation and programming. Most of all, each needs a sound business plan and suitable financial support to operate and maintain the garden. Opening the doors to the public requires more funding, and more site changes, than supporting a private garden. Yet every generous gardener wants to share and engage their garden with the community. As they should, for each garden, when done well, offers an inspiration and refuge unlike any other cultural resource.

In 2014, The Trustees looked to the English National Trust as a model for our management tools. We established Statements of Significance. We tested Spirit of Place statements. We created baseline standards and a work order system for capital expenses. We approved a Living Collections Policy for the curation of plant collections. Today, we are testing Guiding Principles documents that describe each garden area, state its management intent, and frame the style, type, and intent of plantings while allowing individual horticulturists some freedom in horticultural selections that allow the gardens (and the horticulturists) to thrive. In almost all cases,

we have inherited a garden that has matured into a unique work of art. That maturation, however, means that existing plants are reaching their viable life span, particularly in New England, so the curation of the plant collections at each site is becoming our most critical planning need. While welcoming repeat visitors, we have also had to recognize the impact of people on a place and build awareness of site capacity and seasonal pacing of visitation to protect property resources while maximizing their public enjoyment 365 days a year.

As the nation's oldest statewide conservation and historic preservation organization, the 120 properties of Massachusetts' Trustees of Reservations are united by Charles Eliot's bold idea of protecting exceptional places of historic, natural, and scenic value for the public enjoyment. Today, we are striving to create public gardens where curated horticultural collections thrive in beautifully preserved settings and welcome all visitors. Unique legacy gardens and creative new garden design is often signature to our public gardens. Interpretation and programming are focused on horticulture, botany, garden techniques, historic legacy, and new garden spaces that spring from that legacy. This work has leveraged our public gardens from relative obscurity to a major pillar of our current strategic plan. More than a preservation success, they connect spirit and mind with the personal touch of each creator. With the right guiding documents, preservation easements, and financial plans in place, they can each become playgrounds for the imagination.



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