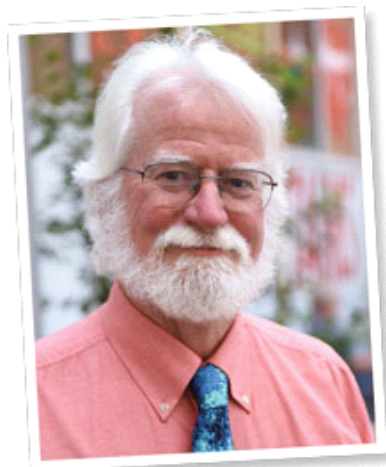


12/1/2022

Don't Try This at Home. You Can't Afford It.

John Friel



John Friel

The Perennial Plant Conference at Swarthmore, a yearly October highlight, always includes something jaw-dropping, something you KNOW you can't do.

Whether by virtue of scale, expense and/or sheer audacity, it's simply something to admire and draw inspiration from, like the best parts of another nearby extravaganza, the Philadelphia Flower Show.

This year, Swarthmore had three such presentations. Two involved fabulously wealthy people from history; the third creator was there in person.

Crowninshield Garden: When the words "DuPont" and "horticulture" intersect, the results are extravagant—and sometimes extravagantly ironic. Paul Orpello, Director of Gardens and Horticulture, described the ongoing restoration of this expansive Roaring '20s folly, an array of faux antiques

now old enough to be real antiques.

Crowninshield is part of the Hagley Museum at Eleutherian Mills in Delaware, the erstwhile gunpowder factory that begot the DuPont fortune. When the firm outgrew it, a DuPont heiress and her husband—one of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders—created what Hagley's website calls "a garden of intentional ruin ... crafted to appear worn away ... to convey the patina of time." After the Crowninshields' passing, their eponymous garden lay mostly untouched for 50 years. Ergo, it now comprises "an industrial ruin, a manufactured classical ruin and an actual garden ruin."

Arches, mosaics, fountains, colonnades and pillars all vanished under blankets of bittersweet and porcelain berry. As they're cleared, some original plantings have, amazingly, emerged. Crowninshield is a work in progress, to be viewed but not actually explored. Stay tuned.

Untermeyer Gardens: Three consecutive fabulous fortunes nurtured this 145-acre pleasure palace along the Hudson River. The owner of the world's largest hat factory built elaborate gardens and a 99-room mansion, then lost everything in the 1876 financial crisis.

Owner #2, made substantial improvements, but grounds and mansion languished after his death. Enter Samuel J. Untermeyer, millionaire lawyer, who in 1899 set about creating "the finest garden in the world."

He built 60 greenhouses and employed 60 full-time gardeners. One day a week the public could enjoy formal gardens, massive statuary, terraced landscapes, illuminated fountains and dramatic river views.

By 1970, when efforts began to save the grounds from development, the mansion had long since been razed and the gardens had gone to hell. Untermeyer's heirs had auctioned off nearly everything. Vandalism took a heavy toll, as the place became a haven for local teenagers, gangs and a satanic cult. Some graffiti has been kept as part of the gardens' story.

That story was told by Andrew Schuyler, horticulturist with Untermeyer Gardens Conservancy. Partnering with the city of Yonkers, the Conservancy keeps Untermeyer open to the public year-round. Much has been restored, and it's a sought-after site for weddings and photography.

Martha Stewart's Gardens: Yes, that Martha. Author, media star, businesswoman, Internet presence. The original influencer, before that was even a thing, is a serious hands-on gardener. Presently, she told us, "Perennials have taken over my life."

Martha doesn't mess around. Her first garden, Turkey Hill, occupied four acres in Connecticut. Desiring roses, she bought 900 plants—and has since moved them all, twice.

Current homes include a 156-acre spread in New York, with stables, a tree nursery and a labyrinth under construction which, when finished, will be Guinness Book-worthy.

Martha drops some serious names. Her neighbor? Ralph Lauren. Original owner of her Maine home? Edsel Ford, Henry's son, namesake of a vehicle rendered collectible by spectacular commercial failure. But she's down-to-earth: "My gardener just quit and I'm pissed."

At 81, Martha is—seriously—impressive. But is her story all that different from the others?

Magnificent gardens are a rare justification for obscene wealth. Untermeyer and Crowninshield arose just post-Victorian Era, when the mantra was still, as Schuyler said, "It's not done until it's overdone."

But yesteryear's pleasure palace is today's money pit. Can such indulgences be sustained? Yes, if enough people value places of grace, beauty and jaw-dropping inspiration. May there always be such venues. Good luck, Martha.

GP

John Friel is marketing manager for Emerald Coast Growers and a freelance writer.