

Here We Go Again! HPS Takes on Newport, RI

by Jane Witten & Marty Detering

AS THE LAST SUITCASE WAS LOADED UNDER THE BUS for our early morning June 15 departure, the heavens opened up! Leon Miller navigated the highways north and we came to port at the **Swiss Village Farm (SVF) Foundation** in Newport—right on schedule.

Taking shelter from the misty rain, we viewed a PowerPoint briefing during our lunch in one of the offices. Founded by Dorrance (“Dodo”) Hill Hamilton in 1998, SVF Foundation¹ is a nonprofit dedicated to preserving germplasm (semen & embryos) from rare and endangered heritage breeds of food and fiber livestock. Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine and the Smithsonian Institute are part of the team that works to cryopreserve the germplasm in an effort to protect biodiversity and the world’s food supply (the same concept as seed banks). We were privileged to have a guided tour of many of the barns and laboratories, normally not open to the public. SVF has done a miraculous renovation of the stone cottage architecture. Gardens of tried and true plants complement the entire setting.

The rain not subsiding, owner Susan Ruf and her gardener greeted us near the portico of **Hillside**, a magnificent shingle-style home circa 1882. Towering above the 2½-acre property, a collection of beech trees (*Fagus* sp.), London plane trees (*Platanus × acerifolia*), and blue Atlas cedars (*Cedrus atlantica* ‘Glauca’) nearly as old as the house provide the setting for the property. The large lawn sloping to the water offers a view to a studio under construction. Hidden in the canopy of the vintage trees is a Japanese garden house and dry streambed. Oehme, van Sweden &

Associates helped renovate the early gardens. Despite the rain and arriving past the garden’s prime viewing time, it was obvious the Rufs care for and take pride in their garden.

The **Newport Harbor Hotel and Marina** were our digs for three nights. The rooms were very comfortable, and the large breakfasts were delicious. Due to rain, our Harbor Cruise—wine and cheese social on the *Rum Runner II*—was postponed until Wednesday and worth the wait. The captain and his assistants entertained us while providing commentary on all the historic and prestigious sites, as well as the local lore. The captain filled us in on the rum-running trade during prohibition; one of his assistants told the story of the old lady who organized a group of locals to defend against the demolition of the Newport Harbor Lighthouse on Goat Island. It was her grandmother!

Day Two
Rough Point, originally an estate of the Vanderbilts, was enlarged in the 1920s for tobacco and business tycoon James Duke. His daughter Doris Duke initiated the Newport Restoration Foundation in 1968 to protect this property and Newport’s other 18th- and 19th-century buildings.

Frederick Law Olmsted designed the grounds, which reach to the edge of the harbor’s famous Cliff Walk. Spanning a rocky cleft, a stone bridge, rebuilt from Olmsted’s original design,



View from our room, beautiful sunset over the harbor.

frames the chop of Newport Harbor in its perfect arch.

The ocean views are front and center and the rolling turf of the underlying ledge challenge a stroll of any sort. On the opposite side of the house from the water, a narrow tunnel through a privet hedge beckons and reveals the secret inland garden. A stand of hardwoods shading one corner survives from Olmsted’s design. A row of dwarf Elberta peach trees (*Prunus persica* ‘Elberta’) parallels a long rose arbor.

The kitchen garden, a long rectangle enclosed by high privet hedges (*Ligustrum amurense*), still grows flowers, herbs, and vegetables according to Duke’s original list, but instead of winding up on her table, they go to local charities or educational programs on site.

Endearing stories of Doris evoked a chuckle as our group viewed the rooms in her home. Her love of jazz and gospel music brought Hall Overton, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Martha Graham from the Newport jazz Festivals back to her house.

Love of music was second to her love of animals, big ones, including a pair of camels. So it was no problem for her when buying a jet from a Middle Eastern businessman who would only sell her the plane if she would take



Breakfast! Worth the wait.

¹ Learn more about the SVF Foundation at <http://svffoundation.org/>.



photo ©Marty Detering

Olmstead Bridge on the Cliff Walk, viewed from the garden at Rough Point.

the camels off his hands. On Rough Point's front lawn, three topiary camels, sprouting colorful sedums and thymes, commemorate the original live camels' many summers here.

Then there were all the dog stories and the furniture and priceless objects that the canines claimed. Doris herself became adept at gluing together objects broken by the dogs that had free run of the house.

Our lunch stop, **Prescott Farm**, was a lesson in Revolutionary War history. At this colonial farmstead colonists overtook British General Prescott in order to trade for Washington's third in command, held captive by the British. Central to this site was the Nichols-Overing House (c. 1730). The property was scheduled for demolition until rescued in 1973 by Doris Duke and the Newport Restoration Foundation. Touring the 1811 working windmill, colonial era kitchen and herb gardens, and a johnnycake cooking and tasting demonstration gave us little time to finish our lunch!

Seven buildings are hidden in the landscape of Hope ("Happy") Hill van Beuren's garden at **Flint Point Ledge**. At this well-tended personal garden



photo ©Marty Detering

Stone wall with built-in birdbath, one of several at the van Beuren garden.

nestled into the oceanside sloping landscape, a dry stream bed flows past a stone wall with built-in birdbaths and sedum, a kitchen garden, bronze bird sculptures, and a greenhouse with scree gardens of agave and other non-hardy plants. All gardens exhibit tried-and-true plants and stage newer showier eye poppers, like the yellow Itoh peony (*Paeonia* 'Bartzella') that was blooming profusely, echoing the golden leaves of *Aralia cordata* 'Sun King'.

The Elms was the summer residence of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Julius Berwind of Philadelphia and New York. Mr. Berwind made his fortune in the coal industry. In 1898, the Berwinds engaged Philadelphia architect Horace Trumbauer to design a house modeled after the mid-18th century (c.1750) Château d'Asnières outside Paris.

The interiors and furnishings were designed by Allard and Sons of Paris and were the setting for the Berwinds' collection of Renaissance ceramics, 18th-century French and Venetian paintings, and Oriental jades.

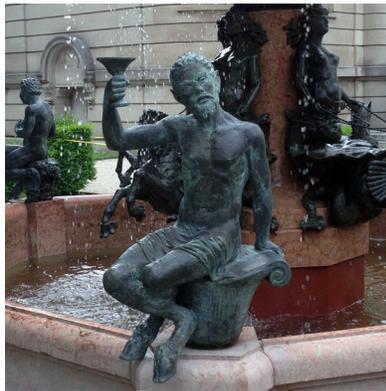


photo ©Marty Detering

One of the The Elms' refurbished fountain's features. Cheers!

The elaborate, recently restored Classical Revival gardens were developed between 1907 and 1914. They include terraces displaying marble and bronze sculpture, a park of fine specimen trees, and a lavish lower garden featuring marble pavilions, fountains, a sunken garden, and carriage house and garage.

Day Three

Along the coastal fields of Little Compton, **Sakonnet Gardens** is the utmost in secret gardens. We had the privilege to be guided by owner John Gwynne. Once down the "rabbit hole," one feels as if in a labyrinth,

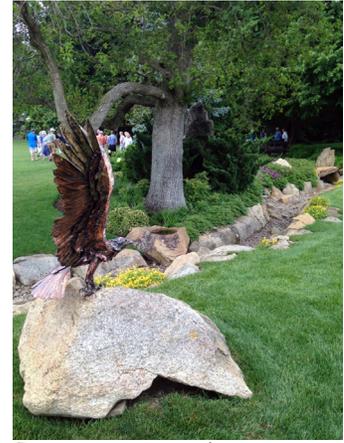


photo ©Marty Detering

Bronze osprey sculpture at Happy van Beuren's garden.

not remembering the way in or the way out! Diminutive and intimate, we explored the structure, plants, views, with eyes wide open fearing you may miss something. It was a special treat to see blue poppies (*Meconopsis* sp.) in a streambed thriving. Another room featured *Heuchera* 'Caramel' beneath *Acer griseum* absorbing all the coral in the light through the shade. Exhilarating experiments of light, space, color mixes, and plant combinations just rock in the garden; surprise elements of whimsy abound. **Opus Nursery** had unusual plants for sale. Should have listened to

Gioia Browne's Plant List from High Elms

- Besia deltophylla*
- Begonia* 'Escargot'
- Carex flacca* 'Blue Zinger'—Blue Sedge
- Clematis fremontii*—Fremont's Leather Flower
- C. heracleifolia* 'China Purple'—Bush Clematis
- C. I AM*® Red Robin—Red Robin Clematis
- Cornus macrophylla*—Large-Leaved Dogwood
- Corylopsis spicata* 'Aurea'—Gold-leaved Winter Hazel
- Dirca decipiens*—Leatherwood
- Euphorbia myrsinites*—Donkey Tail, Myrtle Spurge
- Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris* 'Mirranda'—Climbing Hydrangea Mirranda
- Mecardonia GoldDust*®
- Podophyllum versipelle*—Chinese Mayapple
- Primula kisoana*
- Saxifraga* × *urbium* (London Pride Group)—None So Pretty; Look Up And Kiss Me
- Tanacetum vulgare* 'Isla Gold'—Gold Leaf Tansy

the White Rabbit who said “you’re late, you’re late” to get these rare beauties.

Two towering American elms that grace the upper part of the three acres are receiving first rate TLC at **High Elms**, owned by Gioia Browne and Jim Marsh. Eight other gardens have been designed to utilize the cultural offering of the landscape. A woodland garden adjacent to the barn featured shade-loving ground covers and old rhodies. The summerhouse arbor provides structure for the white wisteria (*Wisteria floribunda* ‘Alba’) and *Clematis* I AM® Red Robin, overlooking a rock garden featuring many pockets of color. Carex, roses, zenobia, and azaleas are thriving around the bog garden, almost hiding the nearby lotus pool. The 2014 addition of the spring garden is a flow of blue and yellow color from early bulbs, ephemerals, perennials, and annuals, highlighted with *Baptisia* ‘Solar Flare’, *Salvia nemerosa* ‘Caradonna’, *Edgeworthia chrysantha*, and *Corylopsis pauciflora*, all sited to be seen through the windows of the 17th-century house. Chopped leaves are the preferred mulch. Gioia used many plants unfamiliar to us,



photo ©Marty Detering

Doris Duke's topiary camels.

so we were happy to leave with a list of possible purchases.

Head gardener Gail Read and interpretive horticulturist Kris Green were our tour guides at **Blithewold Mansion, Gardens, & Arboretum**. We entered Blithewold through the Moon Gate at the Rose Garden where dozens of hardy and disease-resistant shrub roses grow pesticide-free alongside annuals, perennials, shrubs, and bulbs.

The North Garden is surrounded on three sides by English borders designed to bloom from May to frost, as weddings are held here. In the Display Garden, the staff demonstrates new plants and combinations. Approaching the water’s edge are the Rock Garden and Water Garden. Each is planted with species that thrive under the severe weather conditions or moist soils and are very “native” in appearance.

Day Four

Cornelius Vanderbilt II purchased **The Breakers**, originally a wooden summer “cottage”, in 1885. The current 70-room Italian Renaissance-style palazzo, inspired by the 16th-century palaces of Genoa and Turin, was built on this site after the original wooden house burned. This villa is certainly the grandest of the Newport Mansions.

Located on Newport’s highest point Beacon Hill, **The Blue Garden** was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and the Olmsted Brothers firm in 1912–1918 on the estate of railroad tycoon Arthur Curtiss James and his wife Harriet Parsons. Years of decline followed their deaths; the original estate of 125 acres was subdivided; the garden was in ruins and consumed by invasives. Dorrance Hamilton purchased the property and thanks to her love of horticulture and preservation, vision, and generosity, the garden was restored in 2014 using the original

records from the Olmstead Historic Site in Massachusetts. Sited within massive, natural granite outcroppings, this classical garden evokes bilateral symmetry—blue and white flowering plants of all types grow in patterns to frame the hardscaping and flowing fountains. This is the first year it has been open to the public (by appointment only). During the visitor season, the greenhouse serves as a media center for viewing a documentary about the garden history and reconstruction.

Our last respite for lunch in Newport was nearby **Fort Adams**. We first saw this Revolutionary War fortress from the Rum Runner II, now we see the harbor from land and say “Good bye” to Newport.

What would a HPS trip be without the ultimate in Nursery Shopping? Due to trip planner Janice Thomas’s economical wizardry, each of us received a gift certificate to **The Farmer’s Daughter** in Wakefield—providing an opportunity to fill our self-provided crate with plants galore!



Marty Detering and her husband **Hank** have owned and managed **Yankee Hill Farm**, their 40-acre home, since 1985. Marty has bred, trained, and competed horses for eventing, dressage, and fox hunting. While earning Ornamental Plant certificates from Longwood Gardens in 1997 and 2000, and with inspiration from *Tres Fromme*, Marty and Hank transformed two acres of a former cow pasture into a hillside four-season garden. When not weeding, Marty knits, weaves, and spins.

Jane Whitten and husband **John** live in a 200-year-old stone house on a small farm in northern Chester County, where she breeds horses. Restless after their daughters were grown, Jane started taking classes at Longwood Gardens...which led to an insatiable need to own every plant she studied! Jane recently retired after managing a small garden center for 18 years. When not gardening or managing the horses, the Whittens enjoy spending time at their cottage in Maine with their grandchildren.

Ed Note: For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG web site, www.hardyplant.org.



photo ©Ed Bowen

Hydrangea ‘Mountain Mania’

Jane’s Plant Favorites

Aralia cordata ‘Sun King’ (Available from Kim Bechtle at Still Pond.)
Clematis I AM® Red Robin
Rosa Flutterbye™ and *R. Lilian Austin*™
Orlaya grandiflora – an annual, but worth growing. (Available from the HPS Seed Exchange.)
Hydrangea ‘Mountain Mania’, which I bought from Ed Bowen, Opus Nursery, hybridizer of this plant. It has more than doubled in size since I planted it in June and is blooming now (July 27). Red-tinged chartreuse leaves, lace-cap, with slightly pink fertile flowers surrounded by sterile white florets. What a standout it is in the garden!