

## Restoring a Virginia Garden Salon of the Harlem Renaissance

The garden of poet Anne Bethel Spencer (1882-1975) in Lynchburg, Virginia, was, perhaps, an unlikely salon for the African-American literary flowering often called the Harlem Renaissance. Yet during the 1920s, 30s, and for the next three decades, Spencer's garden was a gathering place for leading lights of the black artistic and civil rights community. Scholar Keith Clark reports in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States* (1995) that "W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Paul Robeson, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Maya Angelou are just a few of the artists to visit her Lynchburg home." Civil rights leaders came too: George Washington Carver, Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Thurgood Marshall.

Spencer earned a national literary reputation with poems written from a backyard studio overlooking the garden that she lovingly tended. Organized as a series of rooms defined by hedges and upright evergreens, it is a highly original garden with a vivid sense of color from mixed plantings of herbaceous perennials, annuals, roses, and flowering shrubs. The tapestry of floral color is complemented by ornaments made of found objects. In the garden the poet found inspiration for much of her work.

After Spencer's death in 1975, her house and garden became a museum; the house is a Virginia Historic Landmark. A board of directors is responsible for stewardship of the property, and volunteers, notably from the Hillside Garden Club, dedicate time to tending the garden,

which can be visited 365 days a year, 24 hours a day.

Jane White is a local landscape designer who first visited the site in 1983 at the request of the Spencer board. "I went and my life has never been the same," she says. "I had never had a garden speak to me like that one did and still does." Since that visit, Mrs. White has been an advocate for the garden and its unofficial adviser. In 2008, she helped connect the board to



**A fresh coat of paint is one result of a board work day in May.**

the Garden Conservancy, which organized an assessment team that made recommendations to restore and manage the garden.

In 2009, the Garden Club of Virginia awarded \$10,000 to fund projects in the garden. By fall, a concrete pool, an important garden focal point, had been rebuilt and repainted and replanting the area around it was in progress. A pergola needs rebuilding and Spencer's writing

cottage needs work, as does the main house.

"I don't know of another restored African-American garden anywhere," Mrs. White says. "Good things are happening, but more could be done. We need a guardian angel."

*Learn more about Anne Spencer and her house and garden at [www.annespencermuseum.com](http://www.annespencermuseum.com).*



**Anne Spencer's writing cottage overlooks the garden.**

Susan Scamiholland