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Place Maker

Henriette Granville Suhr, Garden Creator

It is the last day of April, and my friend Marge Sullivan and I are trying to keep up with Henriette Granville Suhr, the energetic proprietor of Rocky Hills, who has offered to give us a personal tour of the thirteen-acre garden she and her late husband created on the steep declivities of their property in Westchester County. As she describes the brambly overgrowth that covered the site when they bought it in the 1960s, she points with her walking cane to first one area and then another. Carpeting the ground is a pale blue wash of forget-me-nots (*Myosotis sylvaticus*). “They spread everywhere, and we like that, so we don’t try to contain them in one spot,” Suhr explains. Their unchecked abundance puts me in mind of what another gardening friend of mine, Lynden Miller, calls such happy horticultural riotousness: “careless rapture.”

Our progress through the garden is punctuated by several pauses. Each one is followed by a comment: that group of tulips did well last year but doesn’t look quite right this time around; the ferns declined here after a particular tree fell down and had to be replaced by a more sun-loving species; over there are some new irises but she is still trying to decide what to plant next year just beyond them. My

eye travels up the sharply rising slopes to the edges of the garden. There are great embankments of huge old rhododendrons and numerous kinds of azaleas. Above are some very tall conifers that loosely enclose the property while screening the road and neighboring houses.

Within the garden are several botanical rarities, gifts to Suhr from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden (BBG) when it closed its Westchester County research center twenty years

ago. Among them are a group of magnolias developed to thrive in this climate zone. Like other hybrid botanical specimens, the magnolias have honorific variety names as well as species names. “That one is Elizabeth, and over there is Judy,” Suhr says, referring to Elizabeth Scholtz and Judy Zuk, two widely-esteemed former presidents of the BBG. At Rocky Hills such arboretum specimens are never merely showcased; they are planted in logical groupings that meld into an overall landscape composition. After we have passed through the magnolia grove, Suhr’s cane rises a few feet off the ground as she points out how small a particular tree was when it was first planted. It now towers overhead. Life and death, growth and decay – these themes are the subtext of this garden story.

Suhr’s own story is as remarkable as the garden’s, and one that has demanded the same kind of innate resilience and ability to turn radical change into opportunity and good fortune. Born in Vienna, she moved with her parents and sister to Paris in 1938 and then in 1941 to the United States. In Paris she



attended Parsons Paris School of Design, and she credits the school’s American affiliation with her ability to land a job at Macy’s upon her arrival in this country. Because furniture styles were often sketched rather than photographed in those days, I am curious to know whether her drawing ability was an advantage in planning the garden at Rocky Hills. “No,” she says emphatically, “I never designed any part of the garden on paper because I think in three dimensions. Instead I walk around and ask myself what needs to

be planted and what needs to be removed to make it interesting – both in a horticultural sense and as a whole landscape.”

Suhr’s job at Macy’s was followed by a brief stint at Lord & Taylor, and then in 1949 she was hired by Bloomingdale’s chairman Jed Davidson to run the department store’s decorat-

ing department, serve as a fashion coordinator, and – in what turned out to be the most important part of her job description – design model rooms to display furniture. Because Davidson was more interested in furniture retailing than fashion merchandising, Suhr’s imagination was given free rein. With his support she went on to do nothing less than revolutionize the way Americans went about decorating their homes.

Suhr suggested that Bloomingdale’s display its towels according to colors rather than brands, a change that led manufacturers to offer what she calls a rainbow array. This allowed customers a wider range of choice and thus more creativity in their bathroom decor. It perhaps sounds trivial today, but this was at the time a merchandising revolution. Yet, Suhr’s greater contribution to home style was the design of model rooms that were changed four times a year. So popular did these become with shoppers – whether they were planning to buy furniture or not – that each season’s new display was greeted with the same anticipation as the opening of a play on Broadway.

It is hard now to remember that in those days, long before craft items from countries around the world were being sold by mass-market retailers, shawls and throw pillows from India or a mirror frame from Provence would have been novelties in creating the ambience of a room. Her contract with Bloomingdale’s allowed Suhr to travel two months out of the year; during these forays – usually in the company of her husband William, a noted art conservator known to one and all as Billy – she quickly developed an eye for spotting just the right accents for her upcoming display rooms.

More important than these inspired touches, however, was Suhr’s embrace of the new when modern art, architecture, and furnishings were just coming into their own in the postwar era. Bloomingdale’s became the first place in America to sell the furniture of Finn Juhl, the distinguished Danish designer. Suhr’s “At Home with Scandinavian Design” display room in 1957 was one of the harbingers of the more relaxed style of contemporary living long championed by industrial designer Russel Wright and textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen. (Like Suhr, both Wright and Larsen allowed their genius as modern designers to spill over into the garden [see *Site/Lines*, vol. 1, no. 1].) Today Larsen, her friend for over fifty years, says, “Henriette had such a light, deft hand in creating change with imagination and authority. She was illustrating an easier new lifestyle and at the same time teaching us connoisseurship.”

This combination of a casual, unpretentious, modern lifestyle with connoisseurship was revelatory to those who

were invited to the Suhrs' dinner parties in their simple, plain (except for accents of color, craft objects, and some works of art), eminently livable country house. No one else back then served smoked salmon, European cheeses, and fine wines from Bordeaux. But the luncheons and dinners at Rocky Hills were given not to impress but to educate. The guests were often the conservators who worked with Billy Suhr at the Frick Collection or people like Larsen who were part of Henriette's world of interior design. "What we were really learning there was civilization," Larsen recalls.

If Rocky Hills is a living work of art, Henriette Suhr's passion is fired by the garden's continual change, with all the opportunities for reconfiguration that this implies. Suhr says that if there were such a thing as unalterable perfection, she would probably stop being a gardener. Always in a state of transformation, Rocky Hills is for her a reservoir of memory, an ongoing activity, and a challenging area for future horticultural creativity and experimentation.

Fortunately, Suhr has found a way to extend the garden's life beyond her own. The Garden Conservancy has made Rocky Hills one of its preservation projects, meaning that the conservancy is working closely with Suhr and the Westchester County Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation (the garden's future proprietor) to ensure that it will be a place to educate garden enthusiasts in years to come. In this way it will follow the paradigm of Wave Hill, the remarkable garden in Riverdale created by Suhr's friend and mentor Marco Polo Stufano on the twenty-eight-acre estate that the Perkins-Freeman family deeded to the New York City Department of Parks in 1960. It goes without saying that those charged with taking care of Rocky Hills will have to cope with increased visitation and raise operational funds to staff and support the garden, if they are to maintain the level of horticultural excellence that Suhr and Timothy Tilghman, her talented head gardener, now provide. Something impossible to provide will be Suhr's own gardening taste and creative genius. As with LongHouse, Jack Larsen's East Hampton garden, which is now operated by its own not-for-profit corporation, the hope must lie in a future gardener having the imagination and willingness to experiment with new ideas. As Larsen says, "Gardens are not still lifes. They are never static arrangements but always changing." – Elizabeth Barlow Rogers