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Title: Redesigning the Cottage Garden at the Morris Arboretum

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Date: March 2003

Abstract:

It has been ten years since the current Cottage Garden at the Morris Arboretum was planted and it is now in need of rejuvenation. The existing garden is very deep, preventing visitors from accessing and appreciating the whole garden. It also lacks height and prolonged seasonal interest. In addition to addressing these problems, the new design will maintain some of the traditional cottage garden elements such as predominantly old cultivars of roses, soft colors, and classic plants. The usage of some classic plants is made more difficult due to hot and humid Philadelphia summers and high deer populations. For these reasons some popular cottage garden plants will not be included in the new design. Another factor that must be considered is how the new Cottage Garden will mesh with other plantings at the Arboretum as well as the goals of the Arboretum. Major changes to the structure of the garden will include removing a strip of turf, adding a path through the garden with a small seat nestled in amongst the roses, and the addition of an obelisk for added height. With these changes, it is the aim that the new Cottage Garden will be a comfortable nook where visitors can stroll, delighting in tiny bulbs popping up in spring, the rich perfume of old roses, and an array of colors and textures throughout the seasons.

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THE HISTORY OF THE COTTAGE GARDEN AT THE MORRIS ARBORETUM

The Cottage Garden at the Morris Arboretum started evolving in the 1980's when the Rosarian at the time, Judy McKeon, came back from a trip to England inspired by the gardens she had seen there. Unofficially, Judy, propagator Shelley Dillard, and dedicated volunteer Ginny Shuster started adding perennials and annuals to the garden next to the Fernery. Slowly this area of overgrown antique and species shrub roses was cleaned up and became a very beautiful garden. As the garden flourished, director Dr. William Klein began showing it to visitors and it soon officially became the Cottage Garden. The Arboretum continued progressing with its long-term plan, and in 1992-93 it came time to construct the loop path that runs through the area where the Cottage Garden was located. At this time the roses and perennials were transplanted to their current location at the entrance to the Rose Garden on the path between the Summer House and the Meadow Garden. Ten years later the garden is in need of rejuvenation and there are some problems that need to be addressed.

THE NEED TO REJUVENATE THE CURRENT COTTAGE GARDEN

The most obvious issues that need to be addressed with the current Cottage Garden become apparent in July after the gardens' peak bloom in June. Copious amounts of *Consolida ambigua* have begun to overwhelm the garden and there are few things of interest happening for the remainder of the year, save a small flush of roses and perennials in the fall. With a maximum depth of 25 to 30 feet, the garden does not allow visitors to interact with fragrant roses and interesting perennials at the back of the bed; therefore, much of the garden is presumably under appreciated. The large depth also makes it difficult for maintenance purposes. Height in the garden is another concern. The beds in the original Cottage Garden were quite narrow so many of the roses selected for the design were relatively short. Since the beds in the current garden are deeper, adding a more diverse range of height would make the garden more stimulating. The final issue to be addressed is the section of turf between the bed and the asphalt path. It increases weekly mowing maintenance, and since this garden is not irrigated, hot and dry Philadelphia summers soon take their toll. The turf becomes brown and very unattractive by the end of summer, detracting from the beauty of the entire garden.

The Cottage Garden is in a prominent location at an entrance to the Rose Garden, a highly visited area of the Arboretum. This demands that it be an attractive, well-maintained garden for as many months of the year as possible.

SITE ANALYSIS

The very first step in developing a new design for the Cottage Garden was to analyze the site requirements in terms of soil, moisture, light, and deer pressure in order to determine the types of plants that will grow best at the site.

A soil sample was taken on September 25, 2002 and sent to Penn State Agricultural Analytical Services Laboratory to be analyzed. It was determined that the soil pH is neutral at 7.0 and all nutrients are at optimum or above optimum levels except for potash. To compensate for the lack of potash, it was recommended that a 10-10-10 fertilizer be applied at a rate of 1.5 pounds per 100 square feet. To aerate the soil, reduce compaction, and add organic matter to the soil, the plan is to double dig the garden while incorporating composted leaf mulch into the soil.

Potash in the leaf mulch will add the nutrients lacking in the soil so no additional fertilizer will be necessary. It was also noted that a slope on the far left side of the bed acts as a drain causing the soil to erode and be deposited on top of a water outlet. To counteract this erosion, the water outlet should be raised and soil will be added to the site to reduce the grade of the slope.

In terms of moisture, the garden typically receives more moisture in the rainy spring and fall seasons while summers are typically very hot, dry and humid. Once the garden is established it will not be irrigated so it is important that the plants chosen can withstand these extreme conditions. This is particularly true for the narrow bed in front of the balustrade that is located in full sun and surrounded by asphalt, thereby decreasing the amount of moisture that can permeate into the soil. Furthermore, since this is the most highly visible area of the garden, it is especially important to choose plants that will perform well in these tough conditions all summer long. Most of the garden receives full sun, with the exception of the far right and left sides. Tree canopies cast shadows, creating areas of both part and full shade. The final site requirement to address is the presence of high deer populations in the area. Since the Cottage Garden, except for a narrow strip in front of the balustrade, lies outside the Rose Garden deer fence, it is important that the plants incorporated into the design be resistant to deer.

DEFINING COTTAGE GARDENS AND THEIR HISTORY

The next step in creating the new design was to research the style and history of cottage gardens in order to define the focus of the new garden. Cottage gardeners simply began as poor, ordinary people in England living off their land as best as they knew how, oblivious to the fact that they had started what would later become a tremendously popular style of gardening. A few sheep, a pig, and a couple of rows of vegetables were all a typical cottagers' yard amounted to. At its roots, Walter Edder stated it best when he wrote that a “cottage garden is an allotment of land attached to every country residence, intended for the pleasure, profit and recreation of the indwellers of the cottage.” (Edder, 1849)

Later, Victorian artists such as Myles Birkett Foster and Helen Allingham began to depict the cottage garden with an aura of romance and idealism. Visions were created of pastel colors and soft lines, smiling faces, and a profusion of roses spilling over a picket fence backed by delightful foxgloves and hollyhocks. The original cottage gardens merged with these sentimental ideas depicted by artists to create a style that is constantly being altered according to popular ideas and influences of society, thus making it a very dynamic and subjective style. As a result, it is impossible to provide a static definition that encompasses all aspects of cottage gardens. Despite this, common themes are found throughout the style and include dense and successional plantings, a simple and rustic approach, and generous plants spilling over to soften hard edges. In addition to these descriptors, the following is an approximate and generalized time line of how cottage gardens came to be and how they have evolved over the centuries:

circa 1400 (Middle Ages): Small cottage farmers had a fenced-in yard where flowers and herbs were separated from the orchard and farm animals. Herbs were used to keep the fleas away and window pots provided some decoration.

circa 1600 (Elizabethan): An increase in the standard of living as well as available varieties of flowers and vegetables influenced the diversity of plants used by the cottagers.

circa 1700: Gardeners became more skilled at cultivation and had more productive gardens of vegetables, herbs, fruit trees, and a few flowers. The inclusion of beehives and flowers planted specifically to attract bees became quite common.

circa 1750: The gentry started living in big cottages, increasing the status of cottage gardens and introducing more skill and cultivation.

mid 1800's (Victorian): Cottage gardens became more idyllic, with romance entwined with subsistence.

circa 1860: Cottage gardens continued to increase in popularity and the variety of plants used was ever broadening.

post 1860: Societal influences such as an increase in factory work, the depression of agriculture and the new fad of bedding plants caused cottage gardens to lose some of their spontaneity.

late 1800's-mid 1900's: Edwin Lutyens, Gertrude Jekyll and Vita Sackville-West were influenced by the style and designed much more distinguished and grandiose cottage gardens, namely Munstead Wood and Sissinghurst.

Authors have attempted to categorize cottage gardens in several different ways, one of these being to group the gardens into two basic designs. In design number one, the cottage was close to the road and a narrow front flower garden was separated from the road by a hedge or fence. Vegetables were grown in the backyard. In design number two, the cottage was set back farther from the road and a narrow path, often bordered by a repeated, more formal planting, connected the road to the house.

Patricia Thorpe and Eve Sonneman provided the most radical description of modern American cottage gardens. They rejected the romantic notions of Sissinghurst and Gertrude Jekyll that are so often associated with cottage gardening today. In doing so, they carried the spirit of the very first English cottage gardens across centuries into the modern gardens of America. Instead of defining the style by the types of plants grown or having a certain appearance, they said to “think of the gardens you pass every day, the most familiar gardens around you, and the most remarkable.”(Thorpe and Sonneman, 1990) Original cottagers grew what was useful, what was available and what they liked, and it was planted in such a way as to make the most out of the small space that they had.

It is the intent that the new design will be primarily modeled after the more romanticized style of cottage gardens popularized by the Victorians; however, the style will be adapted to meet the needs of the Arboretum and the site itself. The design will include themes of abundant, overflowing and dense plantings and many traditional plants. Site restrictions prevent the use of some classic cottage garden plants.

THE NEW DESIGN

Please refer to FIGURE 1, the Final Design.

Addressing the Problems

Seasonal Interest

While the peak bloom period of roses and perennials will continue to be in June, several plants will be added to lengthen the bloom season. *Galanthus elwesii* will join the *Helleborus x hybrida* already present in the garden for a late winter bloom. The arrival of spring will be quietly announced by small patches of soft blue and yellow *Crocus chrysanthus* followed by blue

and white *Scilla siberica* (FIGURE 2). By mid-spring the sweet scent of *Syringa* 'Sensation' will be wafting through the air joined by *Aquilegia* 'McKana Giants', *Allium* 'Gladiator', *Dianthus* cultivars and *Iris ensata*. June will be a profusion of classic cottage garden flowers dominated by roses and complemented by *Digitalis* 'Excelsior Hybrids', *Alcea* cultivars, *Geranium spp.*, and *Clematis* cvs (FIGURE 3). The garden will be carried through the heat of summer by a backbone of plants with gray and textured foliage (*Artemisia* 'Powis Castle', *Stachys* 'Big Ears', *Geranium spp.*, *Dianthus* cultivars, *Perovskia atriplicifolia*, *Nepeta* 'Walker's Low', and *Plectranthus argentatus*) and an addition of colour will be provided by *Lavatera* 'Silver Cup', *Cosmos* 'Sensation Mixed', *Coreopsis* 'Moonbeam' and *Verbena spp.* that bloom all summer long. Removing the entire strip and extending the bed edge to the asphalt path will solve the issue of spent turf detracting from the look of the garden in late summer. This change will also decrease weekly maintenance needs of the garden. August will be brightened with the delightful pink flowers and the stunning purple pods of *Dolichos* 'Ruby Moon', followed by *Aconitum* 'Arendsii', *Anemone spp.*, *Aster* 'Hella Lacy' and a repeat flush of roses in the fall (FIGURE 4). The burgundy foliage of *Hydrangea quercifolia*, *Rosa gallica*, and *R. virginiana* will also provide fall color. Then, as the leaves begin to fall and winter sets in, the coral-red bark of *Salix alba* 'Britzensis', the red twigs of *R. virginiana* and the exfoliating bark of *H. quercifolia* will be on display. Structural elements such as the obelisk, posts, bench, and woody shrubs will maintain a sense of height in the garden throughout the winter and will be beautiful covered in a layer of snow.

Access and Height

Including a simple wood-chip path through the garden, mimicking the strong curve of the asphalt steps, will solve the issue of garden accessibility. It will be four and a half feet wide but it is the intention that plants will be allowed to spill over to soften the hard edges, helping to create the informal cottage garden look. A small seat will also be added along the path. Since the turf is to be removed, this creates an eleven-foot wide bed that can be accessed from all sides, giving visitors the opportunity to smell more of the roses and look at the perennials more closely. Height will be added by including a six-foot obelisk placed in the front bed. It will be placed off-center to maintain the view from the seat to the crabapple slope. Roses will surround the obelisk to provide a gradual change in height and taller perennials such as *Digitalis* 'Excelsior Hybrids', *Cynara cardunculus*, *Cimicifuga* 'Brunette', *Crambe cordifolia* and *Aster* 'Hella Lacy' will be planted towards the middle and back of the beds.

The Cottage Garden Tradition

It was decided to design the new garden in keeping with traditional aspects of English cottage gardens altered to fuse with the requirements of the site and the Arboretum itself. Climate is a key factor since England has a moderate climate while Philadelphia has more extreme temperatures. This makes the use of some commonly classified cottage garden plants, such as sweet peas and delphiniums, more difficult because they will not withstand the hot and humid summers. Attempting to grow plants not suited to the site simply because they are 'cottage garden plants' would create additional, unnecessary labor in a garden that is intended to be relatively low maintenance.

The location of the garden and existing structural elements also affects the ability to stay within the cottage garden tradition. Obviously, a key element missing from the existing garden

is the cottage or house to act as the focal point. To compensate for this, a small seat will be added in the garden to provide a place for rest and contemplation, an analogy for the ideal definition of a home or cottage. There are several other benches nearby so this bench will not have a back, making it less noticeable. Plants surround the bench, helping to create the overflowing intimate cottage garden feeling. The short path leading up to the bench lined with repeated plantings of lemon scented *Thymus* and creeping *Verbena* mimics the cottage garden style where a straight pathway led to the cottage from the main road. The existing stone balustrade and wooden posts also provide an opportunity to exhibit a classic cottage garden combination. Climbing roses and clematis are already spilling over the edges of some of these structures while *Rosa* 'Baronne Prevost' and *Clematis* 'The President' will be added to the front balustrade.

English cottage gardens consisted of a grand proportion of roses so one of the objectives of the design was to incorporate predominantly older roses. This includes cultivars that would have been available to cottagers in the 1800's, prior to the era of modern roses such as hybrid teas. Roses selected for the new design need to be disease resistant, particularly because no pesticides are used in this garden, repeat flowering if possible to maintain seasonal interest throughout the summer and fall, and cold hardy to USDA Zone 6. A representation of roses from most rose classes was included in the design; however, roses from the Noisette class were not used because they are generally hardy only to Zone 7. Some modern cultivars were included either because they were bred to have the appearance of an old rose, for their disease resistance, or for their blooming capabilities. Most of the cultivars of roses already existing in the Cottage Garden were kept, while poor performers were discarded and a few different cultivars were added. A complete list of roses included in the design according to their class can be found in APPENDIX A.

One of the essential components of a cottage garden was the purpose and usefulness of each plant grown. Although the Cottage Garden at the Arboretum is primarily a display garden and the plants are not used for any other purpose, many of the plants in the design do serve at least one function beyond horticultural display (APPENDIX B). For example, *Anthemis tinctoria* can be used as a fabric dye, the flowers of *Borago officinalis* can be used as a garnish in summer drinks or candied, and the foliage of *Thymus x citriodorus* releases a lemony essence when crushed. For this reason the *Thymus* will be planted at the edge of the path, near the bench, where it will receive some foot traffic and visitors can appreciate its scent. In keeping with this trend, most of the fragrant roses will be planted near the path, surrounding the bench, and along the front balustrade where they can be enjoyed most fully. In addition, beehives were a common cottage garden inclusion, and plants such as *Nepeta*, *Borago*, *Anemone*, and *Coreopsis* would have been planted to attract bees.

Design Principles

The design itself is structured around the placement of roses surrounding two focal points, the seat and the obelisk. On either side of the path roses will be planted in a meandering curve to provide a relaxed and contemplative atmosphere to the garden, echoed by annuals and perennials. Attention will be drawn to the seat and the obelisk by concentrating darker colored plants in these areas that will draw the eye in, gradually fading to lighter tones on either side.

One concern is that the garden will appear fragmented because there will be four distinct beds separated by asphalt, wood chips, deer fencing and a balustrade that must all unite into one

garden. This problem is addressed by including strong plant correlations between the beds. The *Verbena* and *Plectranthus* from the front balustrade are repeated in the main bed and all but one of the plants used in the bed on the right side can also be found on the left side. One particular grouping of plants repeated on both sides is *Rosa* 'Mary Queen of Scots', *R.* 'Mme. Isaac Pereire' and *Crambe cordifolia*. *R.* 'Mary Queen of Scots' is the earliest of the roses to bloom and gradually darkens as it ages, complementing nicely with the deep, rich pink of later bloomer *R.* 'Mme. Isaac Pereire' and the airy white flowers of *C. cordifolia*. In the fall, white *Anemone* 'Honorine Jobert' along the balustrade will complement the white centres of crimson climber *R.* 'Dortmund' and contrast with the purple *Aster* 'Hella Lacy'. On the obelisk the light colours of repeat flowerer, *R.* 'Cornelia', will contrast nicely with the deep purple pods of *Dolichos* 'Ruby Moon'. For a complete listing of plants to be included in the new Cottage Garden, please refer to APPENDIX C.

Linking the Cottage Garden with the Arboretum

Since the Cottage Garden is only a small part of the much larger Morris Arboretum, it was essential that it be designed in such a way as to blend in and complement the rest of the garden. This was accomplished by repeating elements to create flow between bordering gardens, namely the Meadow Garden and the Rose Garden. Plants such as *Liatris*, *Iris spp.*, *Rosa cvs.*, *Coreopsis* 'Moonbeam' and the coral bark of *Salix alba* 'Britzensis' (compared with *Cornus sericea* in the Meadow Garden) will be repeated from the Meadow Garden, as well as the wood-chip path. These two gardens complement each other nicely because the Cottage Garden has its peak bloom in June and the Meadow Garden's peak bloom is in August and September. Many of the plants and structural elements, such as the posts and obelisk, are mimicked from the Rose Garden.

The Cottage Garden will also be linked with the Arboretum through its mission of public education. Interpretive signs throughout the Arboretum teach the public about plants. Although an actual sign is not being planned, a site has been reserved in the design for an interpretive sign should the decision be made to add one to this garden in the future. The location, on the right side underneath the canopy of the *Taxus*, was selected because it will not be intrusive to the rest of the garden, it is a difficult site in which to grow plants, and the bed is already raised to a height suitable for a sign. One disadvantage to this position is the mess made by falling red *Taxus* berries in early fall.

A final way to link the garden with the Arboretum is through botanical significance. Botanical significance is upheld in the garden through the use of rose cultivars that have played a particularly significant role in the history of roses. *Rosa* 'Old Blush', a China Hybrid, was crossed with *R. moshata* to create the Noisette class originating in the southern United States. It was also crossed with *R.* 'Four Seasons', beginning the class of Bourbons. *R.* 'Four Seasons' represents a very interesting albeit extremely confusing history. It is referred to by at least fifteen different names, including *R.* 'Autumn Damask', *R. bifera semperflorens* and *R.* 'Castilian', because every country where it was grown refers to it by a different name. It was cultivated extensively in Greece, Italy and Egypt, it traveled to New Zealand and Tonga via missionaries and was brought to the New World by the Spaniards. A third significant rose, *R. virginiana*, is native to the eastern United States and is important because it was the first American rose exported to England.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Since August 2002 the site has gradually been prepared for the new plantings. In August, *Consolida* and other spent annuals were removed from the bed and a thick layer of composted leaf mulch was spread over the garden. In the fall, roses were evaluated for their performance and it was determined which plants would be included in the new design and which would not. Then, in October, the roses that were to be kept for the new design were cut back and labeled in preparation for their move to the nursery at Bloomfield Farm to over winter. Roses that would not be included in the new design were removed and discarded. November 12 was scheduled as a Project Day when the horticulture staff would assist in removing roses from one quadrant of the Rose Garden, also to be replanted in the spring, and in moving roses from the Cottage Garden to the nursery. Persistent rain prevented these tasks from being completed and none of the roses from the Cottage Garden were transferred to the nursery at the time. Wet autumn weather and extreme winter temperatures further delayed the plan to move the roses, as well as the intention to double dig the garden in order to prepare the soil for spring planting.

The process of propagating plants to be used in the garden began in January by taking hardwood cuttings of *Salix alba* 'Britzensis'. Herbaceous stem cuttings of *Plectranthus argentatus* were taken and seeds of several species were planted in February.

Due to the cost of the project and the limited budget, the plan will be carried out over a two-year period. Most of the work will be done in 2003 with the remaining plants to be purchased and planted in 2004 (APPENDIX D).

CONCLUSION

The new Cottage Garden at the Morris Arboretum, to be planted in the spring of 2003, was designed to improve several issues that currently detract from its success. By using plants that provide longer seasonal interest and a more diverse and distinct range of height, a garden will be created that has something on display throughout the year. In addition, a wood-chip path through the garden will give visitors more opportunity to enjoy the garden firsthand by strolling through it, instead of merely passing by while coming and going from the Rose Garden. The garden design is structured around a meandering pattern of old roses, mimicked by annuals and perennials, to increase the sense of a contemplative and relaxed atmosphere. By incorporating several cottage garden traditions and adapting them to the needs of the site, the new garden will represent both a classic English cottage garden as well as a realistic Philadelphia one. Plant repetitions within the garden itself bind it together and repetitions from the nearby Meadow and Rose Gardens help to integrate all three together, creating flow throughout the Arboretum. So, over the next few years as the new plants are planted and allowed to mature, visitors can enjoy an intimate new Cottage Garden at the Arboretum.

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