

American Book Notes

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A new crop of books on American gardens promises Paradise, Eden, Nature and more – all welcome diversions from our daily routines. Caroline Seeborn's new book, *Paradise on the Hudson: The Creation, Loss, and Revival of a Great American Garden* (Timber Press, \$27.95), traces the remarkable story of a place few people have heard of. At one time Greystone, a vast estate on the steep banks of the Hudson River in Yonkers, New York, was home to Samuel Untermyer, a wealthy New York attorney who was an accomplished horticulturist. Working with the fashionable architect William Welles Bosworth, Untermyer created a spectacular garden in the 1920s that showcased thousands of exotic plants. The extensive grounds included water features and follies, such as a majestic columned temple. In its heyday, the garden boasted tens of thousands of flowers and greenhouses filled with orchids. 'I'd rather look at flowers than at a great painting,' he said, and he certainly had the means to keep teams of gardeners busy. On one day alone in 1939, thirty thousand people were recorded visiting the garden. Unfortunately, this paradise came to an abrupt end after his death in 1940 when none of his children wanted the property and attempts to donate it to the city of Yonkers failed. After years of decline and desecration, including the theft of valuable sculptures, demolition of deteriorating structures, and a reduction in the size of the property, what remained was resurrected – beginning in 2010 – by the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, a not-for-profit organisation. Under the direction of Stephen Byrns, who declared it 'a one-in-a-million property', structures were rebuilt, water features were turned on, and the plantings refreshed under the direction of one of America's top gardeners, Marco Polo Stufano. Visitors flock once more to see these extraordinary gardens. *Paradise on the Hudson* is a well-told story of the creation, decline, and rescue of an extraordinary garden.

The planting genius of Marco Polo Stufano comes into play in another more famous garden overlooking the Hudson River in the



Dramatic water garden at Untermyer Park, Yonkers, New York.
From *Paradise on the Hudson*.

Bronx. *Nature into Art: The Gardens of Wave Hill* (Timber Press, \$40) by seasoned writer Thomas Christopher pays tribute to one of America's best public gardens. When it first opened to the public in 1967 Wave Hill was one of the last surviving country estates in New York City. At various times it was the home of Mark Twain, Theodore Roosevelt, and Arturo Toscanini among others (Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, was a visitor). Wave Hill now encompasses a manor house, parcels of land from several neighbouring properties, established gardens . . . and an incomparable view across the Hudson River to New Jersey. The original grounds, which form the core of the property, were laid out by George W. Perkins, an important financier whose passion was preserving the Hudson River Palisades. Today the gardens are a mix of older sections that have been rejuvenated and new areas that represent the best of American horticultural talent. For decades the gardens were under Stufano's wand, and are now directed by his successor Louis Bauer, an equally gifted gardener who had previously worked his magic at



View of the Hudson River framed by a pergola at Wave Hill,
New York City. From *Nature Into Art*.



Expansive grounds at Hortulus Farm Garden,
Wrightstown Township, Pennsylvania. From *Chasing Eden*.



Winding path among birch trees in Monk's Garden
at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

From *Designing a Garden*.

Greenwood Gardens in New Jersey (see HORTUS 131). When Stufano began his work at Wave Hill, he was repeatedly told 'We can't do that here,' referring to his proposed changes based on the colourful mixed borders he had just seen in England. In the 1960s, luxuriant flower borders were not the norm in American public gardens. Wave Hill is today a masterful complex of gardens with breathtaking plantings. *Nature into Art* shows each of the garden areas and how they were rejuvenated, transformed, or created anew. Ngoc Minh Ngo's extraordinary photographs work hand-in-hand with the author's text, presenting us with one of the best garden books of 2019.

Chasing Eden: Design Inspiration from the Gardens at Hortulus Farm (Timber Press, \$35) by Jack Staub and Renny Reynolds is a testimonial to a visually stunning private garden created over many years by two well-known gardening experts. Outstanding photographs by Rob Cardillo document the opulence and serenity of the magical gardens at Hortulus Farm in Pennsylvania. As the authors

wrote, 'When we started our garden making, the gardens were for us. They were the end-of-the-workweek panacea that would lift us up and away from the incessant tribulations that dog any urban worker . . . garden work was the exact opposite . . . of that pressure under which we both worked.' Renny is a lifestyle entertaining expert and Jack a writer and lecturer on edible gardening. They bought Hortulus Farm in 1979 when it was an old dairy farm replete with barns and lots of charm. Over the years they transformed it into a setting for their combined talents and artistic expertise. *Chasing Eden* is a visual tour of a series of more than twenty garden rooms, each expertly designed and planted. From formal areas such as the topiary garden and terrace garden to informal woodland walks, the overall garden rivals any English example. And this beautiful book commemorates the partnership that created it. Hortulus Farm is now on the market after the sudden death of Jack Staub in January 2020.

On a more intimate scale, the world-famous courtyard at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston is a feast for the eye, replete with date palms and seasonal plantings, including nasturtium vines that trail down its four storeys. And now there's a brand-new garden in a completely different aesthetic at the Gardner Museum designed by landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburgh. *Designing a Garden: The Monk's Garden at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum* (Monacelli Press, \$40) presents the designer's process from the day the new garden was proposed in 2011 until it opened several years later. This intimate garden, which complements the recent museum expansion by Renzo Piano, was meant to lure visitors as well as surprise them. The long, narrow site between the original building and a high brick wall presented a challenge to the designer, but the lush stroll garden he conceived was a magical solution. The design owes something to a small terrace garden Van Valkenburgh designed as an intern in British designer Sylvia Crowe's office at the outset of his career. The Monk's Garden is a soothing naturalistic composition of ornamental trees (mainly *Acer griseum* and *Betula populifolia*) and non-showy shade-tolerant plants, such as ferns, hellebores, hepaticas, polygonatums and the like. The garden is all



Celia Thaxter. Chromograph by Childe Hassam
for the 1894 first edition of *An Island Garden*.

about movement along the curving paved paths and sensory enjoyment. In a few short years, the Monk's Garden has matured into a peaceful urban oasis. From the first sketch to planting plans and photographs, the book clearly demonstrates the design process and teamwork necessary to complete a project. 'Like anything else, the



A Favourite Corner by Childe Hassam
from *An Island Garden*.

best way to learn how to design a landscape is to make one', and this book is an excellent record of the process.

When Celia Thaxter's *An Island Garden* (see HORTUS 14) was first published in 1894, it soon became a classic among American garden lovers. The author's down-to-earth advice about the challenges and delights of island gardening, paired with Childe Hassam's water-colour illustrations, have ensured the book's continuing popularity. Over the years it has been reprinted by various publishers, but none surpass the most recent reprint. *An Island Garden* (David R. Godine, \$27.95) is the best of the lot, mainly because Godine is an acclaimed bibliophile and expert on typography as well as a publisher of quality books. For this new edition, the undistinguished original typeface was reset in Bell, the Hassam lithographs reshot, and the binding design and stamped covers by Sarah Wyman Whitman, a well-known book designer, were redrawn. The result is a brilliant reprint that outshines all its muddy predecessors. Celia Loughton Thaxter (1835–94) was an American writer who specialised in poetry and short stories and who, in the last year of her life, wrote this charming book about her tiny garden on Appledore, a remote island in the Isles of Shoals off the New Hampshire coast. Childe Hassam (1859–1935) was a well-known American Impressionist painter who frequently visited Appledore. Thaxter's optimism and excitement about her garden exudes from every page. All her plants were grown annually by seeds nurtured in eggshells over the winter before she brought them over to Appledore for the summer season. In the final paragraph, she writes, 'And so the ripe year wanes. From turfy slopes afar the breeze brings delicious, pungent, spicy odors from the wild Everlasting flowers, and the mushrooms are pearly in the grass. I gather the seed-pods in the garden beds, sharing their bounty with the birds I love so well, for there are enough to spare for us all. Soon will set in the fitful weather, with fierce gales and sullen skies and frosty air; and it will be time to tuck up safely my Roses and Lilies and the rest for their long winter sleep beneath the snow, where I never forget them, but ever dream of their wakening in happy summers yet to be.'