

A Garden of the Gods

GREENWOOD GARDENS, SHORT HILLS, NEW JERSEY

JUDITH B. TANKARD

Nestled in an incomparable setting in northern New Jersey, about an hour's commute from midtown Manhattan, is an extraordinary garden that combines the efforts of two different American families. Today, Greenwood Gardens, established as a nonprofit conservation organisation in 2003 by the descendant of the second owner, is a thriving nature conservancy that honours its unique historic gardens. In the early twentieth century, Joseph P. Day established a home and private pleasure grounds named Pleasant Days that was a family getaway from Day's bustling real-estate office in New York City. He assembled a team of experts to design and decorate his lavish storybook house and gardens. In 1950, when the estate was in a sorry state of disrepair after Day's death, it was rescued by Peter J. Blanchard, Jr., a lawyer and budding gentleman farmer, as a weekend retreat to enjoy with his wife, Adelaide. The fanciful mansion, which had fallen on hard times, had to be demolished, but the gardens were not only saved, but embellished with a welcome layer of evergreen formality.

In the course of his career as a multi-millionaire property auctioneer, Joseph P. Day 'sold more real estate in and around New York City [including Coney Island] than any other single human being in the history of man'. During his lifetime, he grossed more than \$1.5 billion in sales of private estates, office buildings, factories, government buildings and even NYC's Third Avenue Railroad. By 1911 he had amassed enough money to build a sizeable mansion, stables, carriage house, staff cottages, tennis courts, and other structures on the twenty-acre estate. His team of tastemakers in the fields of architecture, landscaping and decoration created a unique dream house. Day entrusted the architectural commission to William Whetten Renwick, a nephew of the famous Gothic Revival architect, James Renwick, whose notable buildings include

St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue in New York City. William Renwick was not only a talented architect who served his apprenticeship in his uncle's office, but also a sculptor and artist of note, having studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. He was known for his sculptural decoration and fresco-relief panels (a combination of bas-relief and painting). Around 1912 he began draughting plans for Day's house to be built of white stucco with applied decorations, including polychrome panels and tile-work. The style of the house was vaguely reminiscent of a *belle époque* villa, but rather unkindly referred to by a journalist as the most pretentious house in Short Hills. The undulating grey-green whaleback slate roof added to its distinctive appearance. The exterior was decorated with tile medallions of richly coloured, glazed faience and polychrome masques manufactured by the famous art pottery, Rookwood Pottery in Cincinnati, Ohio. The lavish interiors were excessive, with custom-made fresco-relief panels depicting family members as well as the birds and flowers in the gardens. Over the years Day sank more than a million dollars into his dream castle.

The extensive gardens, which are mostly intact today, combined formality in planning and informality in its features, an amazing blend of Arts and Crafts, Italianate and rustic structures in a plan that responds to the topography of the site. Stone summerhouses and grottoes decorated with Rookwood tiles, wisteria-laden grape arbours, croquet lawns, and an amazing Italianate water garden with cascade all survive today as well as ornamental sculptures and fresco panels which embellished the gardens. Also surviving are the service quarters, including a carriage house with dovecote, tennis pavilion, and several cottages, all adorned with Rookwood tiles and hand-crafted details. The original decorative wooden lattice work also survives.

Some of the most magical areas of the estate were the terraces immediately surrounding the house, furnished with exedra, decorative majolica vases, brilliant blue elephant-shaped planters, and pergolas draped with wisteria. From these terraces, family members and guests could enjoy the lower gardens and the adjacent 2,100-acre South Mountain Reservation, a county park established

in 1896 and designed by the Olmsted firm. The formal gardens on the south side of the house consisted of grass terraces with ornamental pools and fountain figures leading down to a lower pergola garden. The main steps from the upper terrace down to the gardens were lined with polychrome panels inset in the stucco retaining walls. On the east and west sides of the upper terrace retaining wall, niches with grottoes are decorated with shell, leaf, and fruit-clustered Rookwood tiles which survive today. At the foot of the south axis, the so-called Garden of the Gods was framed by a semi-circular pergola enclosed by openwork trellises. The garden was set off with polychrome herms (now lost) on pedestals between the stucco columns. The pergola, once festooned with feathery climbing vines, glistened against a background of feathery evergreens. A circular pool, ringed with beds of irises and peonies, contained a central statue of Venus, modelled on one of the Day daughters.

Unlike the leisurely pleasure gardens on the south side of the house, those on the east side were more dramatic. An elaborate water cascade consisting of seven basins flanked by horseshoe steps came alive with a push of the button on the control panel inside the house. Like the house and service buildings, the cascade was constructed of stucco and ornamented with Rookwood tiles. A teahouse walkway (once covered with a long grape arbor) connecting two small stone shelters on the grounds remains one of the more inviting parts of the gardens. The rustic garden buildings, constructed from local basalt, provide a welcome counterpoint to the formal areas. The two-storey teahouse with its bold chimney as well as a smaller stone-built garden shelter are both richly decorated with Rookwood tiles on the walls and ceilings.

The Day family, including six children, spent many happy years at Pleasant Days enjoying outdoor pursuits such as horse-back riding, tennis, croquet and strolls through the gardens. During the Depression, Day refocused his business strategy on developing subdivisions, including Old Short Hills Estates adjacent to Pleasant Days which augmented his estate to more than seventy acres. He continued to envisage new projects, including the creation of a replica of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo, Sicily, from various



Above: Garden of the Gods at Pleasant Days, 1930s
Below: Water cascade and house at Pleasant Days, 1930s



Stone teahouse at Pleasant Days, 1930s

buildings being torn down in New York City, but Renwick's death in 1933 curtailed any further building projects. After Day's death in 1944, Pleasant Days was too big and expensive to maintain and the outdated mansion fell into serious disrepair. Fortunately, the Blanchards, who were looking for a weekend retreat for horse riding, farming, gardening and other country pursuits, were able to imagine a new life for the crumbling estate. In 1949 they bought the mansion, carriage house, cottages and twenty acres of grounds, which they promptly set about improving. The house, which was outdated and crumbling to the ground, was razed by a local wrecking company and a new house built on the footprint. Luckily the extraordinary gardens and most of the exterior ornament escaped the wrecker's ball.

Peter J. Blanchard, Jr., a lawyer for IBM, and his wife, Dr Adelaide Childs Frick, a paediatrician, quickly renamed the property The Greenwoods. Inspired by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century formal gardens in France, the Blanchards began planting long allées of trees, such as London planes and Norway spruce, as well as box

and hemlock hedges to complement the older gardens. The much-needed greenery added a perfect counterpoint to the colourful, but maintenance-intensive flower gardens and period structures. From the 1960s until Peter Blanchard's death in 2000, the grounds were expanded and improved, including the addition of two ponds and other wildlife-encouraging features, and the old-fashioned flower borders were simplified or replaced.

After his father's death, Peter J. Blanchard III and his wife Sofia were faced with many challenges and decisions, from day-to-day maintenance to long-term preservation issues for the unique gardens. In 2003, following his father's wishes, they initiated conservation measures by establishing a not-for-profit Greenwood Gardens Inc., to own and manage the property, with the idea of eventually opening it to the public. They teamed up with the Garden Conservancy, a US national charity, to plan the management of the estate as well as showcasing the historic significance of the property. After a lengthy restoration, they opened to the public in 2013. During the restoration, Anne Raver of the *New York Times* declared it a 'jewel in the moss [and] a sleeping beauty [that] will take far more than a kiss to bring back to life'. Under the guidance of Louis Bauer, the director of horticulture, Greenwood Gardens slowly began to re-emerge from its long sleep and enter a new chapter. The ever-greens were pruned, the flower beds were rejuvenated with better-performing perennials, and the smaller sculptural elements underwent restoration. Plans for the more complicated and long-term process of restoring the water features and larger structures were initiated.

Today Greenwood Gardens is more than a jewel in the moss. It attracts visitors from all over the country who come to enjoy the bucolic setting and unique gardens as well as imbibe a nature walk or an educational programme.



My thanks to Peter J. Blanchard III and Sofia Blanchard, who initiated the restoration; Abby O'Neill, Executive Director; Stephanie Murphy, Program Manager; Sonia Uytterhoeven, Head of Horticulture, and the staff at Greenwood Gardens: greenwoodgardens.org