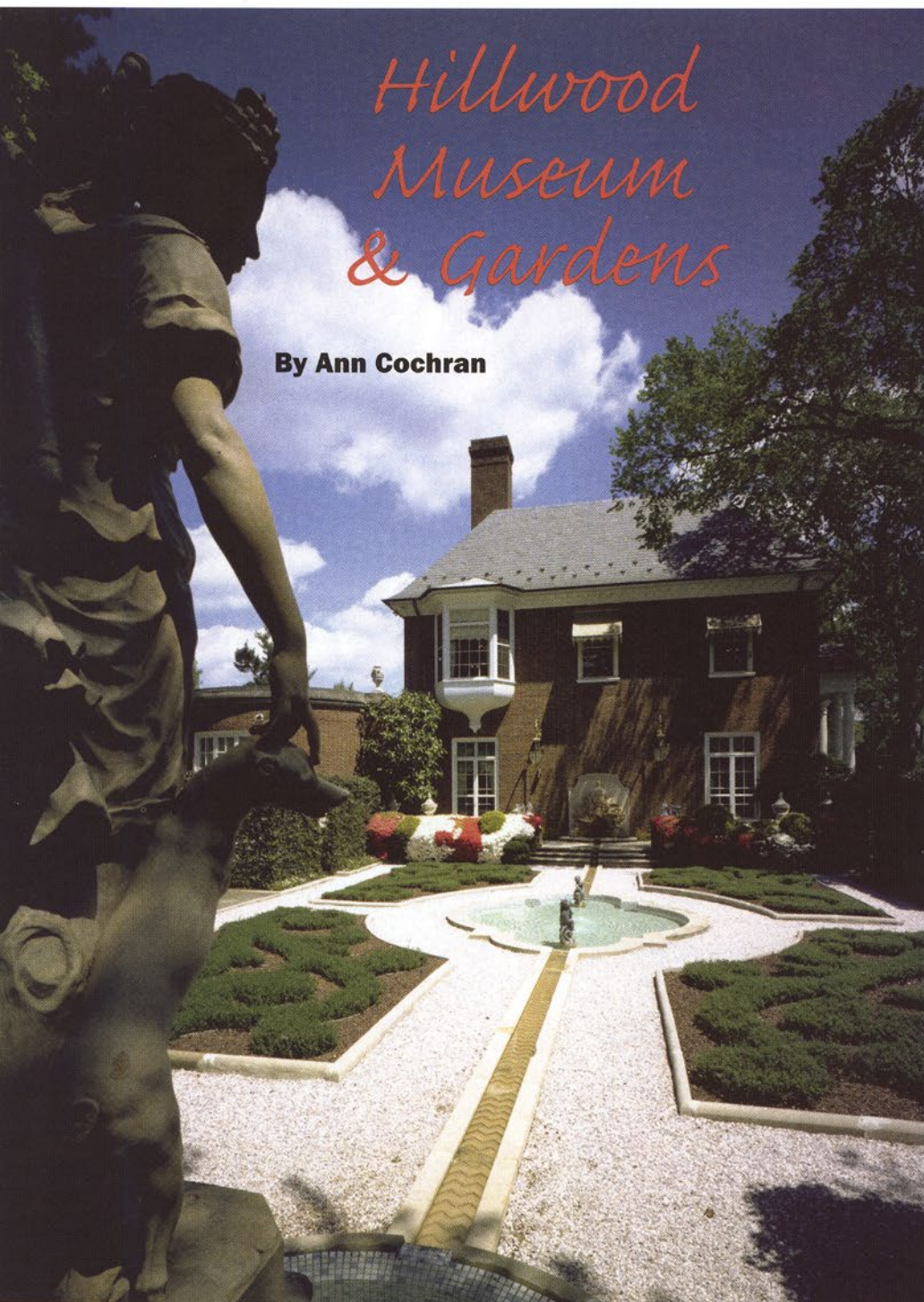


Hillwood Museum & Gardens

By Ann Cochran



Marjorie Merriweather Post loved giving guests a full tour of her comprehensive collection of Russian imperial art and 18th-century French decorative arts. Afterward, they were invited outside for a stroll. One of Mrs. Post's gardeners recalled – with a smile – that people who did not show equal interest in the grounds were not invited back.

Hillwood Museum & Gardens, on Rock Creek Park in northwest Washington, was one of several homes owned by the cereal heiress and art

collector. From the day Post bought it in 1955 until her death in 1973, the 36-room Georgian mansion was intended, and renovated, to display her treasures. Among thousands of notable items are Fabergé eggs, chalices, icons, and liturgical vestments from imperial Russia; Beauvais tapestries; and Sèvres porcelain. In accordance with Posts' wishes, Hillwood opened to the public in 1977.

The luckiest visitors enter Hillwood in the spring. A long driveway winds past a blaze of red and pink azaleas. At the

end of the road, two 80-foot dawn redwoods flank the house. These unusual deciduous conifers have prehistoric origins. Thought to be extinct, a stand was discovered in China in the 1940s by a botanist who brought back seeds and distributed them to select U.S. arboreta.

In addition to being able to afford unusually expensive plantings, Mrs. Post called on prominent landscape architects and garden designers to help her create what we know as garden rooms. When they were finished, the twenty-five acre estate had twelve acres of formal gardens, including a French parterre and a Japanese-style garden.

Because she took up residence at Hillwood during spring and autumn when our DC area climate is its most pleasant, the gardens feature plants that offer the greatest effect in those seasons.

Over 4,000 azaleas bloom in April and May, accompanied by hundreds of rhododendron, spirea, lilacs, and viburnum. The atmosphere is accented with redbuds, cherries, magnolias, dogwoods, and crab-apples. Tulips, daffodils, forget-me-nots, primroses, and pansies fill the beds. In autumn, chrysanthemums join with the deciduous trees to create brilliant splashes of color against the hardwood trees in Rock Creek Park.

Brian Barr, director of horticulture, and his staff of ten (there are also almost 100 volunteers that maintain Hillwood's impeccable landscape) talk about Mrs. Post as if she were still walking the manicured paths. Her wishes were so specific, defined, and documented that her desires for Hillwood left no room for error. Her spirit infuses the property in the nicest possible way. Barr says that his job is to "carry on the tradition of Mrs. Post, making sure the gardens are a living presentation of what she wanted, achieved by the highest possible standards."

Because Mrs. Post had the budget to plant mature specimens five decades ago, the horticulture staff follows a preservation plan to rejuvenate and restore the botanical collections. The entire azalea population has been renewed since 1994. Mature plants

were replaced with the same species and variety. For those no longer available, the staff propagates existing plants to ensure accurate replication. Another challenge is maintaining gardens that push the limits of our geographical zone. Hillwood's gardens are Southern in nature, about as Southern as Washington can bear.

Post brought natural beauty indoors, enhancing every room with orchids, cut flowers, and tree branches. The mansion is still graced with orchids that rotate from the hundreds in the greenhouse and arrangements made possible by the variety in the large cutting garden.



Cutting Garden

In the spring, tulips, daffodils, and sweet peas unite with azalea, lilac, and spirea branches to create generously sized, fragrant arrangements. Peonies, old-fashioned roses, larkspur, and foxglove soon follow, and are mixed with snapdragons and bells of Ireland from the greenhouse. In June, perennials of salvia, yarrow, veronica, and shasta daisy emerge, with zinnias, marigolds, snapdragons, dahlias, and gladioli. In October, when the garden is almost depleted, an abundance of chrysanthemums provide color through November.

Rose Garden

In her quest for the best, Mrs. Post hired Perry Wheeler, a young landscape architect who had assisted with the design and implementation of the White House Rose Garden.

American boxwood hedges contrast with the roses. The round bed in the center is circled by four crown-shaped and eight crescent-shaped beds. Mahogany benches provide a place to stop and smell the floribunda roses,

which flower in May and are in bloom at the same time as the climbing roses on the pergola where white Chinese wisteria blooms. In April, Emperor tulips bloom in each bed to complement the early flowering shrubs that surround the roses.

One landscaper, recalling a conversation he had with a Hillwood retiree, laughed at Mrs. Post's sense of humor. She enjoyed asking guests to "come see my golden boxes" and then lead them to the boxwoods in the rose garden. The varieties found at Hillwood (*aurea variegata*) have not been on the market since the 1920s.

The Japanese-Style Garden

The sound of water rushing down rocks precedes any glimpse of this garden, one of the last remaining examples of the type, influenced by the reintroduction of Japanese culture to America in the 1950s.

Mrs. Post chose Shogo J. Myaida, who designed the Japanese Pavilion gardens at the 1939 World's Fair, for his professional design reputation as a master but not a purist, incorporating American culture with the best traditions of Japan.



On-site project manager Louis Legakis was faithful to Myaida's detailed layout, a traditional interpretation of a mountain. It took over 500 boulders to create that illusion. Paths crisscross the garden; bridges of wood and stone allow graceful meandering access across ponds and streams.

In this American Japanese garden, there is far more color, but blended with the blue spruce, variegated Cyprus, and indigenous plants are trees and shrubs that would be found in a classic Japanese garden: cryptomeria, cherries, azaleas, rhododendrons, Japanese maples, black pine. Lotus and water lilies float in the lower pool, and Japanese iris accent the garden. Because this type of garden





*a legacy
in full bloom*

Hillwood Staff Favorites

White Chinese wisteria
Winter jasmine
Japanese andromeda
Peonies
Roses
Lisianthus
Solomon's Seal
Camellias

has the least dependence on blooming color, it merits a visit regardless of the season and is particularly spectacular in the snow.

The French Parterre

Mrs. Post commissioned two prominent landscape architects to create the French parterre that complements her collection of eighteenth-century French furnishings and decorative arts. Innocenti and Webel, of Long Island, NY, incorporated all the typical elements of an 18th-century parterre, scaled down to fit into a space already occupied by an enclosed garden with a fish pond.

The parterre is divided into quadrants separated by paths, with a shallow pool in the center. Each quadrant contains a low hedge of English boxwood tightly clipped in scroll patterns. The garden is enclosed within high walls where magnolia espaliers thrive thanks to loving attention and constant care.

Lunar Lawn

In the front of the mansion, facing south toward a view of the Washington Monument, a wide expanse of lawn became a special space for entertaining. Its large beds are filled with spring-flowering trees, such as dogwood, magnolia, cherry, plum, and crab-apple. Masses of azaleas, rhododendron, camellias, spirea, and lilacs line the walks, complemented by neatly groomed conifers and hollies.

Over 7,000 tulips and 3,000 pansies bloom in April and May along with the azaleas and dogwoods. Arching elms frame the dramatic view all year round.

Pet Cemetery

Pet lover or not, this is one of the most personal and touching corners of the estate. Honoring years of two-way devotion, weeping dogwood, bleeding heart, dogtooth violet, and forget-me-nots reflect love and loss and loyalty.

Visitor Information

Hillwood Museum & Gardens is at 4155 Linnean Avenue NW, Washington, DC. Reservations are required, call 202.686.5807 or visit: www.hillwoodmuseum.org.

It is a 15-20 minute walk from the nearby Van Ness/UDC metro station.

The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 AM to 5 PM and select Sundays and evenings. It is closed during the month of January and on national holidays.

Adult admission is \$12. Seniors: \$10; college students: \$7; and children (6-18): \$5. Groups are \$10 per person.

The lovely café, with delicious food and reasonable prices, is on the grounds in its own elegant building. Café hours are 11 AM to 4:30 PM; for reservations call 202.243.3920. ☘

Ann Cochran is a freelance writer specializing in travel and health. When she can, she loves to work outside surrounded by the tall trees that shade her garden in Cabin John, MD.