

Hollister House Garden: An English Garden in Connecticut

by Julia Polentes



AMONG THE pastoral hills of northwestern Connecticut sits Hollister House Garden, a traditional English-style garden that evokes the sense of having wandered into a fairy tale. Owner George Schoellkopf was inspired to create it nearly 40 years ago, after a visit to Kent, England, where he toured the gardens of Sissinghurst Castle. He was enchanted by its series of garden rooms, defined by tall hedges and brick walls. Each room presented new views and different color combinations. The abundance of plants softened the

hard lines of the walls, melding them into the surrounding landscape. He returned home and set to work on his own garden of rooms.

AN ENGLISH GARDEN FOR NEW ENGLAND

Schoellkopf, a collector and dealer of American decorative and folk art, had purchased his gently sloping, 27-acre property in 1978 for its historic house—a saltbox farmhouse built in 1760—and the beauty of the surrounding landscape. For the Sissinghurst-inspired formal garden, he wanted a design that wouldn't seem “preten-

tious or inappropriate for an 18th-century Connecticut farm.” His solution was to build a wall, complete with walkways, at a slight diagonal to the axis of the restored, expanded farmhouse. This was the first of many carefully placed “imperfections” that would come to characterize the garden.

After he created the walls of his garden, Schoellkopf experimented with plants. Because England has a wetter and milder climate than New England, many species that are popular in English gardens languish in Connecticut. Undeterred, Schoellkopf tried them out in various locations

The Walled Garden features a serene reflecting pool enclosed by a central brick wall that supports a profusion of vines and climbers.

Additional Information

Hollister House Garden, 300 Nettleton Hollow Road, Washington, CT 06793. (860) 868-2200. www.hollisterhousegarden.org.

- Hours: Open May through September, every Friday from 2 p.m.–5 p.m. and every Saturday from 10 a.m.–4 p.m.
- Admission: Requested donation of \$5.
- Hollister House Garden participates in the AHS's Reciprocal Admissions Program.

Other nearby sites to explore:

Bellamy-Ferriday House & Garden, Bethlehem, CT.

www.ctlandmarks.org/content/bellamy-ferriday-house-garden.

The Glebe House Museum & Gertrude Jekyll Garden, Woodbury, CT.

www.glebehousemuseum.org.

Highstead Arboretum, Redding, CT. www.highstead.net.

and replaced those that failed to flourish. One survivor is *Euphorbia griffithii*, the only hardy euphorbia with orange flowers and a preference for wet soil conditions. It thrives at Hollister, blooming for a month and a half beginning in June.

The walls and tall hedges provide a backdrop for a myriad of plants that now fills the garden. Each room offers different perspectives of the picturesque house, Schoellkopf's private residence. Like the house, described by Schoellkopf as "a pleasant jumble," the garden as a whole doesn't have an overarching focus and each room is unique.

"The best description of the garden is a constant battle between order and chaos. The plan is ordered, but not the experience," says Schoellkopf. "It is composed of

right angles and paths—inside that structure is abundance. The plants are supposed to look as if they grow there naturally."

In reality, it took Schoellkopf years to achieve diverse color schemes that change gracefully through the seasons, with spring being "the most spectacular in the garden," he says. He particularly appreciates the serendipity of self-seeding plants. For example, he allows forget-me-nots (*Myosotis sylvatica*) to seed themselves around the feet of boxwoods, providing "the one moment you can have blue in the garden," he says.

SHARING HOLLISTER WITH THE PUBLIC

In 2004, Schoellkopf and a group of supporters came together to form Hollister

House Garden, Inc., a nonprofit. With the help of the Garden Conservancy, Schoellkopf and Hollister House Garden, Inc. worked out an arrangement in which the nonprofit will assume full ownership and stewardship of the property after Schoellkopf dies. Schoellkopf, who has contributed an endowment for the property's long-term maintenance, will reside there in the interim.

Public engagement is an important part of Hollister's mission. The garden opens to visitors Fridays and Saturdays from May through September. An annu-



Self-seeded forget-me-nots juxtaposed with clipped boxwoods exemplify the balance Hollister strikes between formal and wild.

al symposium with nationally renowned speakers will take place this September, for the seventh year running. Other programming ranges from gardening workshops to live music in the garden.

Asked why he chose to preserve the garden in perpetuity, Schoellkopf observes that his garden was a product of his creative vision, whereas the majority of public gardens in America are shaped by the vision of multiple professionals. "I think it's unusual and people seem to really respond. Americans don't make this kind of garden very often," he says, "but they love visiting Hollister."

Julia Polentes is an editorial intern for The American Gardener.



The colorful double border opens out to the sloping landscape beyond in this early morning view.