



RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

Polly Hill Arboretum

by Mary Yee

THE WARM Gulf Stream flowing into the Atlantic Ocean around Martha's Vineyard creates favorable growing conditions for plants on the popular tourist island that would never survive on the Massachusetts mainland just a few miles away. This was what one summer resident, Polly Hill, discovered when she set out in 1958 to make a garden on a former sheep farm she had inherited from her family.

EXPANDING THE GARDEN PALETTE

Hill, who also lived in the Delaware Valley, had been impressed with the showy, exotic plants in the major public gardens in that region. From her perspective, "Martha's Vineyard was poverty stricken horticulturally." An amateur horticulturist with a huge sense of curiosity and an equal measure of patience, she began raising some of her favorite trees and shrubs from seed. She had a special interest in magnolias, rhododendrons, azaleas, and stewartias, which thrive on the island's acidic soil, and she bred and



Left: Polly Hill, shown here in her garden in 1979, introduced many selections of trees and shrubs to New England. Above: Stone walls and magnificent native trees, such as this black oak (*Quercus velutina*), create a pastoral scene at the arboretum.

introduced many selections in her time. One of the most well-known was a big-leaf magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*) she named 'Julian Hill,' for her husband, a DuPont chemist. Its main distinction was its ability to thrive so far north. "It's too tropical for words at Martha's Vineyard," she said of it.

In the mid-1990s, shortly before her garden became a nonprofit arboretum, she said, "Right now there's very little that is really mature. A one-generation garden isn't much of a garden. It's in the second generation that you really see a garden." Hill died in 2007 at the age of 100. Today, visitors to the Polly Hill Arboretum can

enjoy the fruits of her labor as they explore over 70 acres of her living tree museum and surrounding woodland filled with native beeches, oaks, and sassafras.

Tim Boland, the arboretum's executive director, says visitors "can expect to see a classic New England landscape with old stone walls that provide the framework for

our open meadows and protection for our plant collections.” The collections feature a diverse mixture of non-native and native plants. About 20 percent of the trees in the arboretum were raised from seed by Hill. In keeping with the times, the arboretum is also invested in plant conservation. Boland says, “We view native plants as essential in our gardens and landscapes, maintaining the biological heritage of the island as well as being superb choices for tough conditions.”

SAFEGUARDING NATIVE FLORA

The natural environment at Martha’s Vineyard is a challenging one of salt spray, wind, and nutrient-poor soil. “Martha’s Vineyard has the rarest ecosystem in Massachusetts, referred to as a sandplain grassland,” says Boland. Among the rare, endangered native plants that can be found at the arboretum are coastal plain blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium fuscatum*) and grass-leaved lady trusses (*Spiranthes vernalis*). The arboretum propagates endangered plants through a state permitting program to share with other conservation programs, as well as for its own ecological restoration projects, such as the New England blazing star (*Liatis scariosa* var. *novae-angliae*) that populates its meadows, which were formerly agricultural fields.

Its MV Wildtype program is focused on propagating local native plants from wild-collected seed to make them available to gardeners.

KEY COLLECTIONS

The plants from afar that fascinated Polly Hill continue to be visitor favorites. A fenced-in area called Polly’s Play Pen, which served as a trial plot for Hill’s experiments, holds many plants. The most

popular is a redvein enkianthus (*Enkianthus campanulatus*) planted by Hill in the 1970s. A hardy native of Japan, this woody species with bell-shaped flowers typically grows into a shrub about 8 feet tall, but this one is a monster tree at about 30 feet tall and is recognized on the National Register of Champion Trees.

Camellias, rhododendrons, and azaleas thrive close by, including the semi-evergreen North Tisbury azaleas selected by Hill for their low, ground-covering habit. In another section of the arboretum, two rows of Kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) that Hill planted over half a century ago now form an allée that offers a white canopy of June flowers and creates a shaded summer pathway. Not too far away is the ‘Julian Hill’ magnolia, which produces its 18-inch, white flowers at the same time.



The flowers of ‘Delmarva’ *stewartia* feature ruffled pink-and-red-streaked white petals and purple stamens.

A number of trees that seem out of place in New England always attract attention, such as the monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*), an odd looker from South America with pointed, overlapping leaves, and Chinese dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*).

The nationally accredited *Stewartia* collection consists of over 70 Asian and North American specimens, including a native *Stewartia malacodendron* that Hill planted from seed and later named ‘Delmarva’. It took 27 years to flower, but for Hill, it was worth the wait. Because this specimen has proven extremely difficult to propagate, the

HOW THE RECIPROCAL ADMISSIONS PROGRAM (RAP) WORKS

This American Horticultural Society program is designed to encourage people to visit gardens, arboreta, and conservatories while traveling. As a current member, you receive free admission and/or other special discounts at more than 330 sites throughout North America! Here’s how to make the most of this member benefit:

- View the current list of participating locations and the RAP benefits they offer at www.ahsgardening.org/rapgardens.
- Contact the garden to confirm the RAP benefits it offers. (Some sites may choose to enforce a 90-mile exclusion policy; if your zip code falls within that distance from the location, you would not receive the offered RAP benefits there.) Admission to special events may also be excluded.
- Present your current membership card at the admissions counter or gift shop to receive the RAP benefit(s) offered by that garden. Each card will only admit the individual(s) listed on the card. In the case of a family, couple, or household membership card that does not list individual names, the garden must extend the benefit(s) to at least two members; it is at the garden’s discretion to extend benefits to more than two individuals. Some gardens may require a photo ID.

arboretum is currently the only place where you can see its gorgeous flowers.

A GARDEN FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Polly Hill Arboretum is a tree-lover’s haven and a bucolic place to have a picnic or go for a long walk. While Hill is gone, her imprint is visible everywhere in the arboretum that bears her name. “We continue Polly’s philosophy of observing plants, recording data, and sharing our results with others,” says Boland. “The joy is in the sharing—through our educational and internship programs—and we intend to keep this wonderful iconic, historic landscape intact so that others may enjoy it for many years to come.”

Mary Yee is managing editor and art director of The American Gardener.

Additional Information

Polly Hill Arboretum

795 State Road, West Tisbury, MA 02575. www.pollyhillarboretum.org

- Hours: Open sunrise to sunset year round.
- Admission: \$5; children 12 and under free.
- RAP benefits: Free admission, free parking.