

DAY TRIP

In the Garden of Yin, Yang and Yeats

By Ellen Maguire

July 1, 2005

IN April, Petronella Collins, 85, made her annual spring move into a cottage by Tyrrel Lake in Innisfree Garden, 150 idyllic acres hidden away in the verdant horse country of Dutchess County, N.Y. Ms. Collins, who will stay until November, maintaining the garden with the help of nine part-time assistants, is matter-of-fact about her enviable, if rustic, lodgings and her position as curator of Innisfree since 1993. "I'm an old lady," she said. "I'm lucky to have a job at all."

Innisfree Garden, 75 years old, is named for a poem by William Butler Yeats, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," that used imagery of an island in Lough Gill in Ireland.

The garden was created painstakingly over 20 years by the late Walter Beck, an American painter inspired by the work of Wang Wei, an eighth-century Chinese artist. Mr. Beck originated the term cup garden for the three-dimensional asymmetrical images he composed of rocks, streams, plants and flowers of varying sizes and shapes around his 40-acre natural lake.

He was befriended by Lester Collins (Ms. Collins's husband, who died 12 years ago), a landscape architect and student of an ancient Japanese gardening handbook called *Sakuteiki* or *Sensai Hisho*, usually translated as *Secret Teachings*. Mr. Collins connected the individual gardens with a meandering path to form one large cup garden, made up of the grounds, water, sky, cliffs and surrounding low hills. The result of this cultural cross-pollination is a sanctuary that prizes its balance of yin and yang as much as its extensive botanical collection.

Ms. Collins warms to her daily tasks ("The composting soil looks good enough to eat, a dark chocolaty brown," she said one day in mid-May), but she plays down the mystical aspect of her work. "Mr. Beck was forever coming up with new philosophies," she said. "I just figure out the best way to get things done."

It's possible to make a cursory tour of Innisfree -- now administered by a private foundation -- in about an hour, but at the price of missing carefully planned detail. "Every nook has a different look," said Don Briggs, mayor and a lifelong resident of the nearby village of Millbrook.

The basic path, a walkway around the lake, allows for detours to linger in inviting settings. The sound of rushing water from the meticulously designed falls and streams, originating at a six-acre reservoir on a hill above the grounds, is a constant companion, as is bird song.

Beginning to the right of a picnic area near the parking lot, take the path under a wisteria-covered arch, past a tall tree native to China called a metasequoia, to one of the first cup gardens: a 30-foot rock cliff waterfall surrounded by slate sculptures and an abundance of luxuriant large-leaf petasites and blue forget-me-nots. At 2 p.m., the ideal viewing time, the sun illuminates the mist, providing a striking backlight to this primer of Eastern philosophy: upright rock is yang, or male, and water is yin, or female.

Farther west, past Dumpling Knoll, with its unusually tall cucumber magnolia tree and excellent view of the marsh plants in the bog garden, wooden planks zigzag over a serpentine stream lined with ferns to a series of long stone planters where pink and white peonies and some uglier relatives bloom in spring. "I love alliums with their great purple balls on tall stalks," said Ms. Collins. "But they have genuinely hideous foliage, so we hide them in the back."

Bloom chasers will find plenty to admire as summer progresses: white yucca, orange butterfly weed, clematis in a variety of colors, a hillside of yellow day lilies and masses of pink and white lotuses in the lake.

Purple loosestrife, a frequent interloper in Northeast landscapes, will not be visible if Ms. Collins can help it: Marion Beck, Mr. Beck's wife, hated its color, and Herculean efforts are taken to eradicate it. "It's the only plant in the garden the deer don't like to nosh on," said Linda Ahlin, one of the part-time gardeners.

But Innisfree's beauty rests in its curative effect, no matter the season. "It's a place of great spirit," said Mish Tworowski, a jewelry designer from Manhattan who has a weekend home nearby. "An astringent for city life."

On a brick terrace, chairs sit under a pergola covered with knotty trumpet vines in a cup garden where trees, not rocks, are the sculpture: beeches, ginkos, a Japanese maple and six towering 125-year-old oaks. On an adjacent patio, visitors can try out the iron garden furniture Ms. Beck selected in the 1930's. The chairs were once blue, but Mr. Collins had them painted bright yellow. "A much more swinging color," Ms. Collins said.

Beyond the terrace, a meadow stretches north to six-foot Tip Toe Rock. "My favorite rock, if I had a favorite, for its sheer elegance," said Ms. Collins, adding that it was probably dug up from the south end of the property by Mr. Beck.

On hot summer days, garden regulars know to slip under the nearby stone bridge, where a cool bench awaits them alongside a rushing waterfall. And at the south end of the property, a 60-foot-high fountain jet mists passersby on a forested peninsula in the lake.

ALONG the way, there is ample opportunity to look for wildlife: Innisfree is home to gray herons, chipmunks, a surfeit of groundhogs and ravenous three-foot water turtles, which have no predators and feast on hapless baby geese. The walkway continues east through a storm-damaged hemlock forest and a meadow with smoke trees (named for their ethereal puffs of foliage) to five slender maples whose branches are just eight inches long, specimens that Ms. Collins considers the most fascinating in the garden and possibly the most columnar trees in existence anywhere.

"I judge people by those observant enough to stop and look at the trees, which are very peculiar, and those who just walk by," she said, adding with a sigh, "Half the people don't notice."

The walkway returns to the picnic area, where visitors can have lunch on tables or rest on tall wooden chairs overlooking the lake. "Back in the day, Innisfree Garden was the one place I would take ladies I wanted to impress," said Mr. Briggs, the Millbrook mayor. "It's one of our treasures."

Touch of Eden

I Will Arise And Go Now

THE drive to Innisfree Garden (845-677-8000, www.innisfreegarden.org) is about 90 minutes from Midtown Manhattan. Take the Taconic State Parkway north to the Route 44-Millbrook exit and follow Route 44 east for 1.7 miles to Tyrrel Road. Turn right and continue a mile to the garden gates.

The garden is open from early May to mid-October from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays; admission is \$4. On Saturdays, Sundays and holidays, it is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; admission is \$5. Bicycles and dogs are not permitted.

On July 16, Hudsonia (www.hudsonia.org), a nonprofit Hudson Valley environmental research institute, will have its summer benefit at Innisfree, giving visitors a rare chance to see the garden at sunset.

Picnic tables by the lake make Innisfree an ideal spot for lunch carried in from Slammin' Salmon (3267 Franklin Avenue, Millbrook; 845-677-5400) or Mabbettsville Market (3809 Route 44, Millbrook; 845-677-5284).

Café Les Baux (152 Church Street, Millbrook; 845-677-8166), a bistro open for lunch and dinner, is a terrific choice for indoor dining.

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