

Garden Profile: Hillwood's Cutting Garden

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With the special exhibition *Living Artfully: At Home with Marjorie Merriweather Post* on at Hillwood now, it seems especially fitting at this time to highlight Hillwood's cutting garden which provided beautiful flowers for the Mansion when Mrs. Post was in residence and still does today.

Jason Gedeik, head of greenhouse and design operations, says: "The cutting garden is a cornerstone of our horticulture heritage and tradition here at Hillwood, and we are proud to maintain something Mrs. Post originated during her time – providing fresh flowers for weekly floral arrangements." It is part of Hillwood's "living tradition," he says, "doing things here that were done decades ago."

Mrs. Post stipulated in her will that there should always be fresh flowers and orchids in the Mansion. During the growing season members of her house staff would cut flowers daily for arrangements displayed throughout her Hillwood residence.

"The cutting garden is a functional garden as opposed to a display garden," says Drew Asbury, greenhouse and cutting garden grower. "Its primary function is to produce cut flowers, which makes it automatically different from any other garden at Hillwood."

"Over the years it has evolved, shifted, changed and diversified," Asbury says, "but it has always been in the same location at Hillwood." When Mrs. Post purchased Hillwood in 1955, clay tennis courts were located in the area where the cutting garden is now. It is conveniently located opposite the entrance to the greenhouse, and it is mostly in full sun and close to the kitchen side of the Mansion.



View of the Cutting Garden across from the Greenhouse

Since the cutting garden is on the same level as the Mansion, a low stone retaining wall marks the periphery from west to east on the north side. On the south side a flagstone path leads from the Mansion to the administration building. Beds of annual flowers decorate the top of the retaining wall and edge the flagstone pathways.

The well-tended Cutting Garden has 21 straight rows for growing flowers with mulched paths between each row, and two wide paths that cut across the garden and intersect in the middle. Two tall trees, a *Ginkgo biloba*, on the north side, and a *Pinus strobus* (white pine) on the west side, and the two *Chamaecyparis obtusea* 'Crippsii' flanking the steps on the north side provide additional interest in the landscape of this garden.



Rows of flowers in the Cutting Garden

This summer alone one can find 50 different kinds of flowers being grown in the cutting garden from early spring to late fall. Numerous different cultivars of many of these flowers are grown to provide a wide range of colors, notably among the yarrows, asters, plume celosia, gladioli, lisianthus, globe amaranth, sunflowers, and zinnias. The number one requirement for a flower to be in the cutting garden, Asbury says, "is that it will be able to last a full week in an arrangement so it always looks fresh for visitors."

The calendulas grown this spring unfortunately didn't pass the test for lasting well in an arrangement and were replaced with long stemmed gladiolus plants. This Old World plant of the iris family is named for a small sword referring to its leaf shape. This year Hillwood is growing 20 different gladiolus cultivators, and 35 to 40 of each cultivar are planted once a week from April 15th to mid-August. It takes gladiolus plants approximately 10 weeks to bloom.

Since many lilies are used in arrangements for the Mansion, one to two crates of different cultivars of lilies are grown in the Greenhouse each week. Space in the Greenhouse at times is at a premium because it is used for growing the seasonal display plants and seedlings for

the Cutting Garden while housing the tropical plants orchid collection. The production Greenhouse is effectively used for 10 months with June and July somewhat dormant for cleaning and sanitizing.

Snapdragons, an old-fashioned favorite, flourished in the Cutting Garden this year. Snaps are an excellent crop to grow in the Greenhouse, Asbury says. Last winter many crops of Greenhouse snaps were grown with successive sowing and were placed in the Cutting Garden in the spring. They produced many blooms until early July when they ceased growing well once Washington's summer heat kicked in. He also grows the rocket series of snapdragons for summer production in the garden. The snapdragon, *Antirrhinum*, gets its name from its fancied resemblance to a dragon's face.

Perhaps the most popular and special flower grown in the Cutting Garden for many years is the elegant rose-shaped lisianthus. This annual from the genus *Eustoma* grows on tall straight stems that branch with multiple flower heads and is available in a variety of wonderful colors, including shades of pink, purple, yellow, green, blue and white. Some cultivars are even bi-colored and can last for weeks in a floral arrangement.

Since they are very slow to grow from seed, Hillwood buys lisianthus plugs—plants a half-inch tall, and grows them from these established seedlings. "We grow eight different cultivars," Asbury says, "250 of each. The lisianthus takes up more space, three rows, than any other plant in the Cutting Garden." The first crop of lisianthus, called lizzies here, went into the Cutting Garden April 1st for blooming by mid-June, and the second crop was planted May 1st for blooming in mid-July.



Asiatic lilies, yellow, zinnias, craspedia, and bakers fern in the Visitor Center

Zinnias are one of the most spectacular flowers of the summer season in this region, and having a bouquet of multi-colored zinnias to look at brightens a day. The tall, sturdy-stemmed, vividly colored zinnias growing this year in the Cutting Garden are just lovely, and Hillwood has grown two crops of them. The first crop started from seeds in the Greenhouse in April was planted in mid-May for flowering mid-June. The second crop is planted in mid-July for flowering mid-August.

Near the middle of the Cutting Garden a large patch of sunflowers of various heights and coloration come into their mid-summer glory. And, as late summer approaches, the important fall crop of dahlias will show off their richly colored flowers in the Cutting Garden, lasting until frost. Their tubers were overwintered in the bulb room and planted in late spring.

One of the biggest challenges in managing the Cutting Garden is to not only have flowers blooming all the time, but to stagger blooms of each crop. Various techniques are used to do this including using the refrigerator to create a dormancy for some seedlings, starting seed at 2-week intervals, cutting back half of certain crops and planting bulbs at different times.

Virtually all of the chrysanthemum cuttings taken mid-May to mid-June are now rooted and being potted by volunteers in July. Disbudding plays a key role in creating big and beautiful mums for the autumn flower arrangements at Hillwood. Constant daily attention is required for this labor intensive process done mostly by volunteers who remove side buds from a plant to promote bigger blooms from the remaining buds.

The first director at Hillwood, Roy Bentley, being from England, had a love for roses and the Cutting Garden in the 1980s was devoted entirely to roses, about 400 hybrid teas. It reportedly took about an hour each day to deadhead them. These were used for cut flowers in the Mansion and other flowers were grown in beds in front of the Greenhouse. By the late '80s, the Cutting Garden included a wider variety of flowers with less space devoted to roses. The area in front of the greenhouse was used for mum production for the fall garden until it was changed to lawn in about 2003.

During the extensive restorations at Hillwood in the mid-1990s, the Cutting Garden underwent renovation of its irrigation and electrical systems and revamping of its flagstone pathways. After Hillwood's major restoration work was completed in 2000, it was realized that more flower arrangements would be needed each week at Hillwood for the new Visitor Center, increasing the need for more flowers from the Cutting Garden.

The needs of the Cutting Garden were the driving force to start the volunteer program at Hillwood, according to Bill Johnson, horticulturist/volunteer coordinator. In 1992, he found that the care of the garden required more staff than was available, so he urged Fred Fisher, Hillwood's second executive director, to start a volunteer program. Johnson tested it with 10 people in '93 and started a full program with 29 volunteers in the garden, Greenhouse and Library and 10 Garden Docents in 1994. Today volunteers are involved with all aspects of Hillwood's horticultural program assisting with: the production of fresh flowers, the creation of floral designs, the care of orchids, the Greenhouse and the plants and shrubs in

the gardens. Interpretation volunteers also help in with Visitors Services, lead tours of the gardens and Mansion, and assist with Membership.

The Cutting Garden is always a special attraction for visitors because it is a garden space not seen in many public gardens. As they wander through the paths, visitors can see the same flowers growing in the garden that they saw used in arrangements in the Mansion, the Visitor Center and the Café. In the Cutting Garden's peak time, June through October, the arrangements at Hillwood contain 100 percent Hillwood-grown flowers.

Gedeik notes that "we continue to grow some of Mrs. Post's favorite flowers like the zinnias, and we are bringing back the growing of delphiniums. Last fall we overwintered delphinium seedlings in the cold frame and planted them in March. This fall we will save any plants that make it through the summer to have a head start on next year's crop. We are also growing tuberose for the first time in many years. Mrs. Post's daughter Dina Merrill had strands of tuberose in her bouquet for her first marriage, so we are interested in growing them here at Hillwood."



Tuberose

"It is the goal at Hillwood," Asbury says, "to have a high percentage of the cut flowers here grown from seed." The exception will be the lisianthus and those plants grown from tubers and cuttings. Asbury joined the Hillwood staff last November to choreograph the Greenhouse growing and Cutting Garden initiatives.

The western end of the Cutting Garden includes exciting display beds of hybrid tea roses, climbing roses, peonies and perennial flowers with the shasta daisies a special highlight just now. A small flagstone terrace with wooden benches is in this area under the shade of the pine tree for visitors to sit, as I've done, and simply enjoy the beauty of these flowers.