

## **Consultant Outlines Five-Year Plan to Update Hillwood's Gardens**

*Betty Cochran, Newsletter Volunteer*

In March, volunteers heard landscape architect Rodney Robinson describe the recommendations of his firm's five-year plan for editing and enhancing Hillwood's gardens, presented at a continuing education session. Mr. Robinson was retained by the Board of Trustees last fall to work with board members and horticultural staff in editing and updating some of Hillwood's most mature gardens. Joining him in this session were Executive Director Kate Markert and Board President Ellen Charles.

Over the years Hillwood has renovated or restored many of its special gardens, Kate said, including the Japanese-Style Garden, French Parterre, and Putting Green. But the large beds that connect these garden rooms have been allowed to mature with very little editing. The board wanted to work with a landscape architect who understood and respected historic gardens and Mrs. Post's approach to the landscape.

After reviewing proposals and meeting with various firms, last fall the board unanimously selected Rodney Robinson Landscape Architects of Wilmington, Delaware. They were impressed with the firm's experience and sensitivity especially with historic projects, Kate said. The firm's many clients have included Longwood Gardens, Winterthur, Ladew Topiary Gardens, Scott Arboretum, and Chanticleer, and it oversaw the recent restoration of the French-style gardens at Nemours in Wilmington.

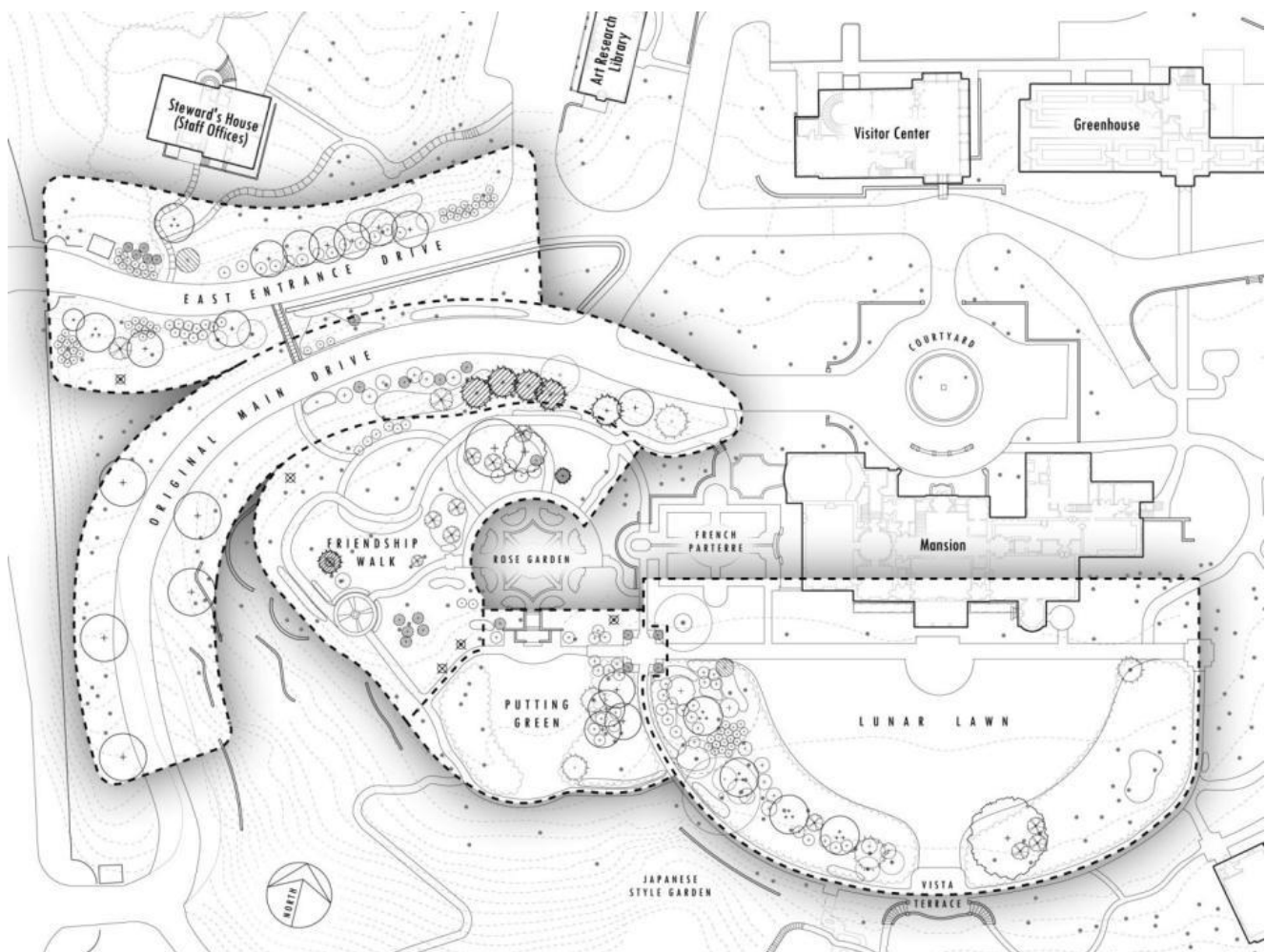
Robinson then sketched out his ideas and recommendations for Hillwood's gardens for the next several years, illustrating with photos from Hillwood's archives and with current photos to show how various garden areas have changed over the years. He listed the five goals of the project:

- Enhance the visitor experience by extending the "seasonality" of the gardens to make them more interesting in all seasons. In Mrs. Post's time, the gardens were largely a huge, exuberant spring display, with not a lot going on in the other seasons, he said.
- Revitalize the plantings. The first step is editing—deciding what to take out—which is easier for someone from outside to make suggestions about, he said. Then there will be new additions, or new palettes, of plants. The project isn't just a historic restoration, Robinson said; it will also introduce new plants as appropriate to restore the vibrancy and exuberance that Hillwood's gardens have always had.
- Increase the horticultural diversity. New plants will be added in the spirit of Mrs. Post's time.
- Improve the connectivity between gardens, by opening views and framing views. Right now it's easy to get turned around or lost within the gardens because of the many curved paths, and because many sight-lines have been blocked by shrubs and trees that over time have grown too large.

- Communicate Mrs. Post's passion for excellence to visitors. The first thing Robinson and his staff did was to familiarize themselves with the original design intent of the gardens, through the many photos in the archives. They also assessed current garden conditions, ranging from plant health, soil structure, and drainage to plant diversity, plant size, views, and seasonality. They met with horticultural staff to find out what the staff's challenges were and how they felt about the gardens.

### Identifying target areas

Then Robinson and Hillwood together identified the areas that they felt were in the greatest need of attention: the Lunar Lawn, the area around the Putting Green, Friendship Walk, the lower entrance drive (main drive), and the upper entrance drive.



*Garden areas that will be the focus of Robinson's work*

As for the Lunar Lawn—the area considered in most need of attention—archival images showed a much greater amount of plant color and exuberance, with evergreens of various sizes providing a contrasting background for the blooming plants. Current views show how the evergreens have grown, in effect marching to the front of the beds and taking over, Robinson said, with only a thin strip of flowers in front of them. There's now a sameness in

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the size of the shrubs, contrasts have disappeared, and the nature of the garden has changed from the original intent, he said.



*Archival image of the Lunar Lawn*



*Current view of the Lunar Lawn*

Archival photos of walkways around the Lunar Lawn, and paths in many other locations, show that originally the plantings were banked or sloped back from the paths: plants

edging the walkways were low, and plants gradually increased in size with greater distance from the walks, producing a sense of openness. But many shrubs have grown up and out toward the edge of the walks, creating a wall or tunnel effect, he said, and also blocking views that would give visitors a greater sense of where they are. To return to the original design, the recommendation is to prune back or remove many of those plants.

In some locations, around the Lunar Lawn and elsewhere, tall trees that provided high shade—the tree canopy—have been lost to storms or age over the years. That not only changes the original design but causes plants that need shade to decline, Robinson explained. Because it takes a long time for new trees to grow tall enough to restore that canopy, the recommendation is to plant, where needed, smaller trees such as cherries and hawthorns that will grow fast and provide a lot of color and texture. After 10 or 15 years, as the canopy trees become tall enough, the smaller trees can be edited out.

### **Considering plant palettes**

In discussing what kind of plant palettes could be used in the Lunar Lawn, and elsewhere, Robinson said that although English ivy, vinca, and pachysandra were the standbys for groundcover many years ago, there are now many wonderful, colorful groundcovers that can add diversity. For shaded areas, they include heucheras, carex, astilbe, and epimedium.

For shrubs and other choices, the many possibilities include hydrangea, with its extended season of bloom, which the staff are already planting; specialty plants such as edgeworthia, which blooms in January or February; the conifer chamaecyparis for screening in sun or shade; and viburnum, which produces flowers and then fruit for seasonality.

He also showed recommended plant palettes for the other four targeted areas, indicating that plants that look good and work well, such as the boxwood and other shrubs in Friendship Walk, would be left as they are. Only where there are problems—such as good-sized plants that are within five feet of each other, or a multitude of plants that are within a small area and have to be continually pruned—would some plants have to be edited out. And sites in which plants have been lost, such as the area behind the Rose Garden, would also receive attention. There, after the soil has been improved, the plant palette might include viburnums, redbud, and more spirea, plus hellebores, sarcococca, and hosta, which would introduce a richness on the ground level. In some places, trees now lost would be replaced—for instance, a columnar evergreen that once provided a strong architectural element near the Putting Green; or cherry trees along the lower entrance drive; or several blue spruce, which provided fine color contrasts, along the upper entrance drive.

Elsewhere, among features that Robinson commended is the long flowering border on one side of the walk to the Greenhouse. It's absolutely splendid and visitors love it, he said. The recommendation is to repeat it on the other side of the walk, after soil problems there are addressed.





*Hillwood's Greenhouse*

### **The beginning phase**

The first phase of the plan—and the project for 2013, Kate said—is the current renovation of the large bed of shrubs and trees on the west side of the Lunar Lawn. Three years ago a large horse-chestnut there was blown down, damaging other plants; also, the soil was wet all the time. When existing plants were dug out and the area was excavated to about three feet, a broken clay pipe that was constantly leaking water was found. New drainage pipes were laid, old roots were removed, and the soil was abundantly amended with pine fines, which last longer than any other kind of enrichment, Robinson said. Some of the existing plants were replanted and new plants were brought in, including cherry trees, hydrangeas, and groundcover.

By this September, we will decide what work will be done for 2014, Kate said. Rodney added that Hillwood's horticultural staff are already doing some of the editing of the plantings that needs to be carried out.

Mrs. Charles commented that in Mrs. Post's time, Hillwood was really a one-season garden, a spring garden, plus the fall coloring and the mums, and that now we're talking about a garden for four seasons. We have to remember, she said, that Mrs. Post was a very progressive woman, and she would welcome the kind of changes in the gardens that are being proposed.