

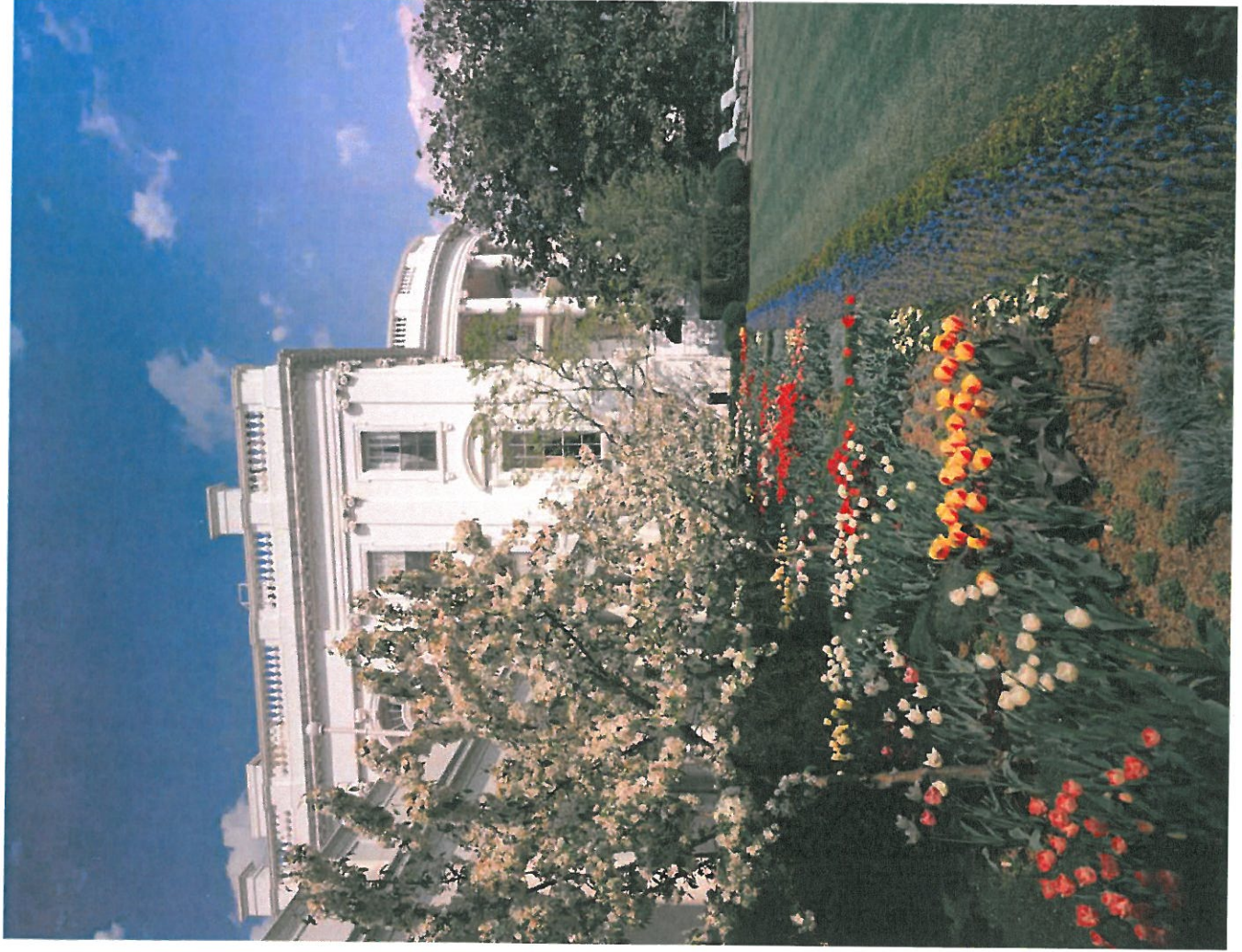
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ROSE GARDEN, WHITE HOUSE



It began at the Palace of Versailles in June 1961, when John F. Kennedy was visiting France for the first time as president of the United States. The French president, Charles de Gaulle, hosted the Kennedys at a glittering dinner in the Hall of Mirrors, followed by a ballet performance at the château's Royal Opera House. The grand finale was an unhurried, silent drive through the royal gardens in the dark of night. Hugh Sidey, a journalist traveling with the president, recorded that drive for posterity:

After the performance, the Kennedys, with their hosts, slowly motored through the grounds and the gardens of Versailles. The mist still clung, giving the vast cobblestoned courtyards the mystery and romance that they had held for the French rulers who once lived there. Huge spotlights bathed the buildings in diffused beams. The fountains glowed and sparkled, the shadows of the statues reaching into the black and conjuring up the heritage of grandeur. Twice, the Kennedys stopped to gaze on this haunting scene. And the last time, the President took the arm of his wife as they walked over the damp lawn, silent, deeply moved. President de Gaulle joined them and the two Presidents solemnly shook hands and said good night.



President de Gaulle used the majestic grounds surrounding the Palace of Versailles to advantage. JFK noticed and began to think that the right kind of garden at the White House could be useful to advance his New Frontier ideas and programs—and simultaneously position the United States in a positive light on the world stage.

A few months later, while vacationing on Cape Cod, President Kennedy sailed with his family to the Mellons' beachfront home in Osterville on Nantucket Sound for an afternoon picnic. (The menu most likely included Mellon family favorites: corn on the cob, fried chicken, vegetable salad, blueberry pie, and vanilla ice cream.) Mrs. Mellon recalled the afternoon in an article titled "President Kennedy's Garden": "My involvement began at a picnic on a hazy summer day in August at our beach house on Cape Cod, surrounded by sand dunes, the sea, and sailboats. . . . Hardly had the President come ashore from his boat when he suggested we sit down and discuss a garden for the White House." The president did indeed get right to the point, telling her that the White House had no garden equal in quality or attractiveness to the gardens he had seen and in which he had been entertained in Europe. He wanted an American garden, open and expansive, designed for function and beauty in the traditions established by two of America's founding fathers—Washington and Jefferson. His wish list included a lawn large enough to hold a thousand people with a continuous display of colorful flowers and a new set of steps to connect his office to the garden. Even though Mrs. Mellon considered herself an amateur, she couldn't resist such an exciting assignment and agreed to give it some thought.

On a hot, humid day in September she brought her friend the landscape architect Perry Wheeler to the White House to assess the proposed site. As they sat in the shade of Andrew Jackson's tall *Magnolia grandiflora*, they were surprised to see President Kennedy walking briskly toward them, grinning and full of questions about the garden. She recounted their conversation in her article: "What do you think can be done? Have you any ideas?" Although I had no thoughts of what to do at the moment, the President's enthusiasm and interest were so contagious that I felt I must certainly find him a good solution." She and

Mr. Wheeler found the setting stark and unfriendly, surrounded by white buildings and ornamented with only a few white, straggly 'Tom Thumb' roses. "It was an interesting problem involving a fascinating place."

The Rose Garden is bordered by the West Wing building to the west, a long colonnade to the north, and the residence to the east. To the south, the garden is open to a sweeping view of the South Lawn. The space has been reinvented many times over the last two hundred years, beginning with the small buildings that Thomas Jefferson built on either side of the mansion. These service buildings, the original west and east wings, were similar to those he had built at Monticello. Each extended one hundred feet, was fronted by a long, covered walkway, and was divided into offices and storage rooms. The west wing included a room for ice, another for firewood (with coal storage below), and a servant's privy, or necessary room.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the space gradually became filled with greenhouses and a large conservatory bursting with roses, orchids, camellias, palm trees, and potted fruit trees, which were favorites of Ulysses Grant. When Teddy Roosevelt tore down the greenhouses and conservatory to make way for a new office building, later called the West Wing, his wife Edith shed a few tears but soon had the vacant rectangular space converted into a formal, parterre-style Colonial garden, featuring beds of roses and old-fashioned flowers in a swirling geometric design. Ellen Wilson supplanted Mrs. Roosevelt's garden with a strict plan of hedges and beds of roses that ran in straight lines on either side of a central lawn and a formal president's walk lined with standard roses that ran parallel to the colonnade. For the first time it was called a rose garden. Franklin Roosevelt enlisted the services of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. to develop a comprehensive landscape plan for the White House grounds that is still in use today and is known as the "Bible." Olmsted told FDR that the formal gardens on the east and west sides of the mansion were the intimate and private areas of the landscape and that the flower plantings should be confined to these two gardens. During the Truman administration, the interior of the crumbling old residence was gutted and refitted with steel beams. Amid all the renovations, the Trumans



PAGES 232–33: The Rose Garden, looking west toward the Cabinet Room in the West Wing.

PAGE 234: Katherine crab apple trees and tulips border the colonnade on the north side of the Rose Garden.

PAGE 235: Tulips open to the midday sun in the Rose Garden.

ABOVE: During lunch at the Mellon family beach house on Cape Cod in the summer of 1961, JFK asked Bunny to redesign the Rose Garden.

PAGE 238 TOP: Bunny's hand-drawn plan for the Rose Garden.

PAGE 238 BOTTOM: Bunny's watercolor of the Rose Garden. The president approved all of her ideas for its redesign, except for the tent.

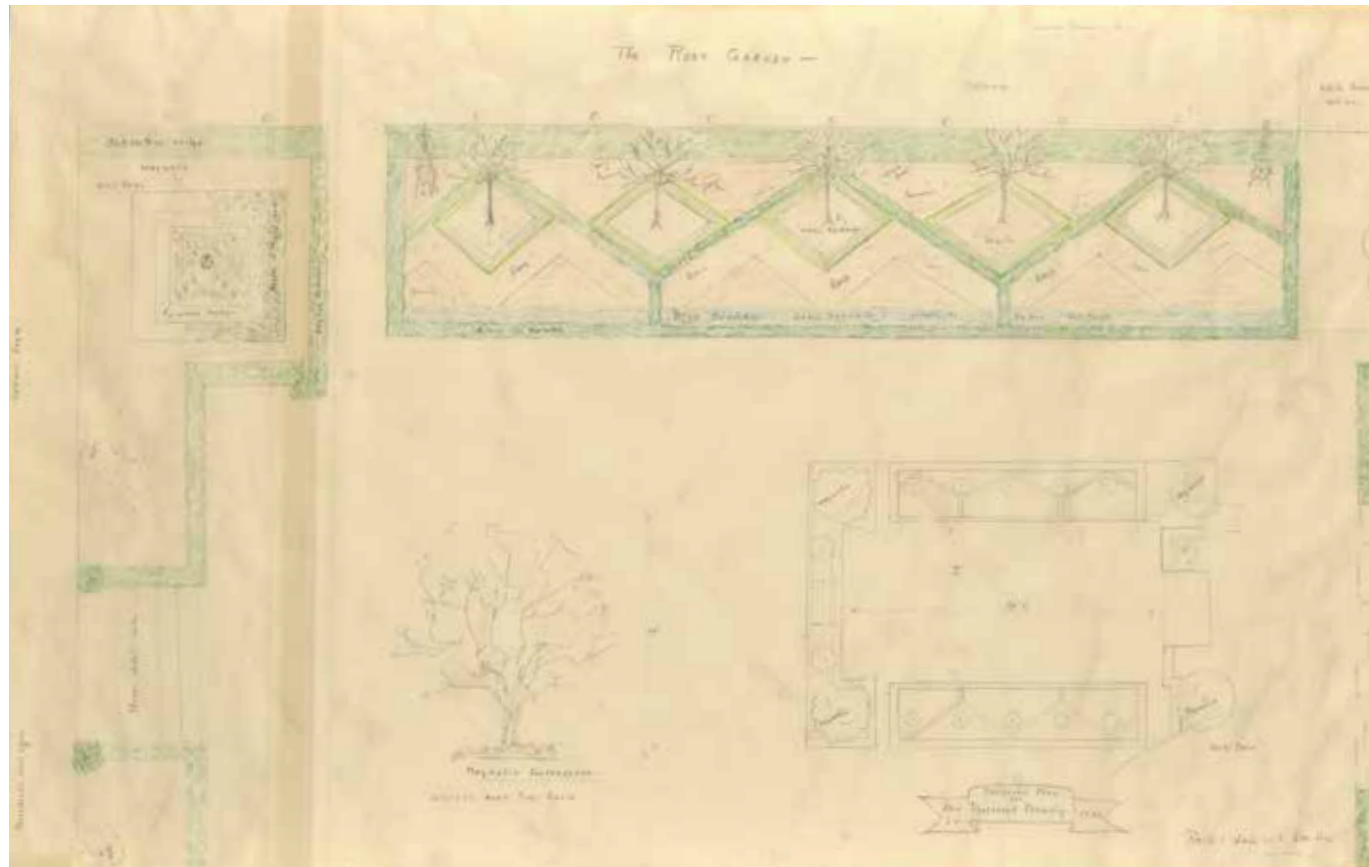
PAGE 239: The northern and southern floral borders, corner magnolia trees, and the redesigned steps that JFK requested are all visible in this aerial view.

PAGE 240: President Kennedy granted honorary citizenship to Winston Churchill on the redesigned Rose Garden steps. Churchill's son, Randolph (standing to the president's left), accepted on his father's behalf.

PAGE 242 LEFT: Mrs. Mellon conferring with one of the "G men," as she called them, as the magnolia trees were being planted in the Rose Garden.

PAGE 242 RIGHT: It took a large crew to carefully set the *Magnolia x soulangeana* in the four corners of the Rose Garden.

PAGE 243: President Kennedy enjoyed a clear view of this magnolia from his desk in the Oval Office.



with steel beams. Amid all the renovations, the Trumans managed to plant a few white roses that soldiered on in the garden—the “pitiful little Tom Thumb roses” that Mrs. Mellon had seen that memorable afternoon.

Some time passed before she finally found a starting point for the design of the garden. One cold October evening, on a routine walk near her Manhattan townhouse, she noticed the bare magnolia trees in front of the Frick Collection, trees she had long admired, but on this particular evening it was as if she were seeing them for the first time. She was struck by the beauty of their shape as the light filtered through their branches. As she recounted in her article, she had “hoped to find an inspiration that would help me bring all of the President’s requirements together,” and she thought that magnolias would soften the white structures and anchor the garden in the four corners, especially the tricky northeast corner, where the colonnade abutted the much taller residence. They would also allow light to pass through for plantings underneath, creating a lovely garden atmosphere. “Their pale, silvery branches with heavy twigs seemed to retain the light of

summer. I knew their pattern of growth would continue to give form in winter and would catch raindrops as well as tufts of falling snow. I felt I could now design the President’s garden!”

Finally on January 27, 1962, she penned a note to the president on her light blue stationery:

Dear Mr. President,

This is my suggestion as a design for your garden.

The flowers will be changed with the season.

The tent at the end will be put up in summer and removed in winter.

This would give a place to sit and dine out doors yet with protection.

All the details have been discussed with the Park Service Department. They have most of the plant material available and can start work at any time.

If this is not near the idea you had in mind please don’t hesitate to tell me and I will begin again.

Sincerely,

Bunny Mellon



Two days later the President said no to the tent and yes to the rest. A crew from the National Park Service would provide the labor.

She began to sketch her ideas, creating a skeleton drawing—the bones of the garden—taking into account, as she always did when starting a design, climate, exposure to sunlight, the dimensions of the space, and how much time could be given to maintenance when it was finished.

The four magnolias anchoring the four corners gave structure to the plan. Bunny designed two intricate, 12-foot-wide beds to border the north and south sides of the lawn. Each bed would be punctuated with five diamond-shaped sections edged with santolina. In the center of each diamond, a *Malus* ‘Katherine’ (Katherine crab apple) would be planted. She chose Katherines for the shade they offer in the heat of summer, their hand-

some form in winter, and the profusion of delicate, peachy pink flowers they produce for two or three weeks every spring. To frame the garden, she selected a variety of boxwood shrubs, including *Buxus* ‘Kingsville’ (Kingsville boxwood) and three different sizes of *Buxus sempervirens* ‘Suffruticosa’ (dwarf English boxwood). The shrubs were to be planted along the length of the beds, at the corners of the lawn, and in a zigzag pattern through the diamond-shaped sections. An *Osmanthus ilicifolius* (holly osmanthus) hedge would border the president’s covered walkway along the northern boundary.

As the president had requested, the steps leading from his office portico into the garden were redesigned to his specifications. He wanted the central step to be larger and wider than the others so that it could serve as a platform for presentations and speeches. And he wanted the three steps above it to be where honorees would stand, so that he would not be positioned above them. He was also keenly

interested in the floral program and put in a special request for plants named in Thomas Jefferson’s garden journals, which he had read.

To keep the president’s beloved lawn in tiptop shape, it was sodded with Merion bluegrass. In later years, a mixture of Kentucky bluegrass and creeping red fescue, a combination of southern and northern grasses, were sprinkled in with the Merion to mitigate the troublesome effects of Washington, D.C.’s swampy climate on the lawn. Limited air circulation in the confined garden, combined with a maintenance program that includes frequent watering, creates an environment for mildew and fungi.

Every garden needs a gardener, and though there were gardeners on staff at the White House, none was assigned specifically to the project. Mrs. Kennedy asked Mrs. Mellon to go and find a gardener. Irvin Williams recalled his first encounter with her, “I was told the First Lady and Mrs. Paul Mellon are coming to talk to you. When the car came around, it was just Mrs. Mellon. It was a great meeting; we discussed her plans and her commitment to the president’s garden. She said she would appreciate it if I could assist her. We talked about the plant material needed. I told her I’d been in conversation with Park Service officials about what was happening down around the Tidal Basin and explained that the Park Service was running a sewer line through the pansy garden and the large magnolias nearby would have to go—be moved or destroyed—to accommodate the new line, and she wanted to see them right away.”

That very day, Mr. Williams and Mrs. Mellon forged what she later referred to as a “meeting of minds” and a “perfect rapport.” And they remained dear friends for the rest of Mrs. Mellon’s life. Two days after their first meeting they located a group of *Magnolia x soulangeana* (saucer magnolias) near Hains Point in East Potomac Park on the Potomac River, three of which had the airy, slender form she was looking for. They tagged them for the garden and found one more at the DC War Memorial in West Potomac Park. Growing in crowded conditions, it had developed an unusual shape—a flat back and uncommon height from reaching for the light—just right for that odd northeast corner.

Finding the trees was one thing; getting them installed

was another matter entirely. On March 8, 1962, Perry Wheeler wrote to Mrs. Mellon, who was in Antigua at the time. “Dear Bunny, How I wish you could have been at the [Department of the] Interior Building yesterday when I went down to meet with the Park Department boys about plans for the garden.”

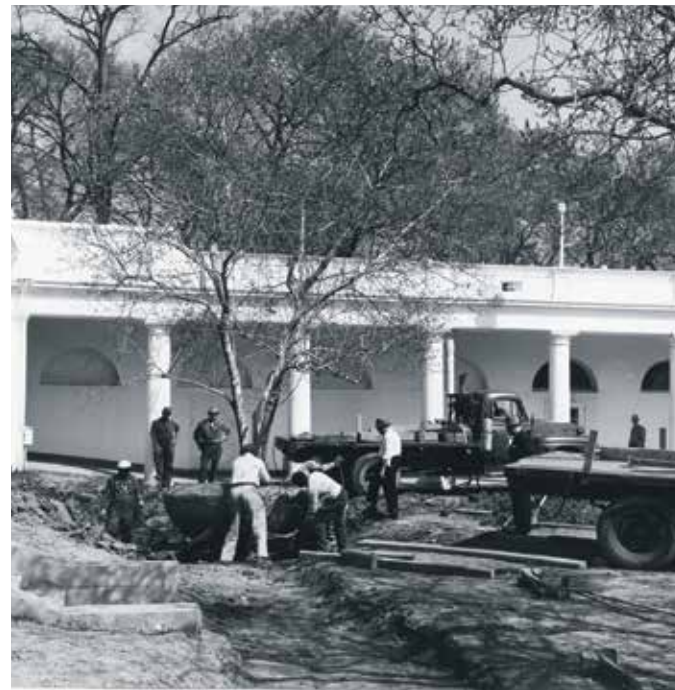
The National Park Service had informed Mr. Wheeler that Mrs. Mellon’s plan to plant magnolias, or any trees for that matter, in the garden had to be abandoned because of the great number of cables running beneath the soil. Mr. Wheeler explained that if there couldn’t be any trees, Mrs. Mellon would have to redesign the garden. This threw the “boys” into a state of shock. Everything—plants, soil, and equipment—had been ordered and scheduled, and the Park Service could not imagine changing a thing at that late date, with the exception, of course, of forgoing the trees. “It did not seem to enter their heads what not having the trees would do to your plan,” Mr. Wheeler added.

The boys pressed on. They insisted that it would be extremely difficult to plant the two trees by the Oval Office because of the slope. And they volunteered their personal critique of the tallest tree, “This ‘cucumber magnolia’ grows much too large and the flowers are not very good.”

Mr. Wheeler suggested a solution: plant them in large, hidden boxes. He told Mrs. Mellon that he also “tried to explain that I thought you were much more interested in the form, shape and winter character, etc., of the trees than you were in the flowers, since they last such a short time.”

In truth, the Park Service crew had decided that the trees would be too costly to move and preferred to buy cheaper trees in a nursery. Perry Williams wrote to Mrs. Mellon that Irvin Williams was tapped to handle the situation because “he seemed to understand the problem and knew more about the effect she wanted than anyone else.” In the end, Mr. Williams conducted a stealth operation. With as little fuss as possible, he had the trees transferred from East and West Potomac Parks to the White House in the dead of night.

And the boys acquiesced, admitting that all four trees could be planted, including the one with the flat back, which could, in fact, “be gotten in close to the corner of the



house”—exactly what Mrs. Mellon had wanted all along. They dug a test hole around the buried cables and proceeded as planned. Then Perry Wheeler decided it would be a good idea to mark out the design. At first the boys objected, but soon realized that it made sense and agreed to have it done before Mrs. Mellon returned to D.C.

The Department of the Interior issued an official statement announcing the commencement of the project: “Region Six of the National Park Service began redevelopment of the West Rose Garden on March 19th. This project, which is being carried out by Park Service personnel with the approval of the Director, National Park Service, involves use of available plant materials from the Park Service’s Daingerfield Island nurseries.” In closing, the statement read, “Mrs. Paul Mellon, a member of the Fine Arts Committee for the White House, has served as a special advisor to the Park Service on the design of the West Rose Garden.”

Finally, the work could begin. Mrs. Mellon and Mrs. Kennedy met on the South Portico with Irvin Williams, Perry Wheeler, and J. B. West, chief usher of the White House, for a private ribbon cutting of sorts and a blessing of the garden, probably the only formal meeting they ever had. Mrs. Kennedy embraced the moment, talked about

the president’s “beloved garden” and about how he had learned to appreciate gardens while traveling in France, Austria, and England.

On Friday, March 30, the dormant magnolias were brought from a greenhouse and set in the four corners of the garden by tree expert Everett Hicks under Mrs. Mellon’s exacting eye. A backhoe loader leveled the soil at the base of the trees to grade and a ditch was dug for the irrigation drain.

As the work began, Mrs. Mellon recalled, “Mr. Williams and I realized the garden needed to be wider than the plan called for; the proportion wasn’t quite right. So we asked the ‘G men’ [National Park Service crew] to move the measuring string on the south boundary over another eighteen inches. Without any discussion or even a moment of thought, they said ‘No,’ turned away and went back to work. Well, Mr. Williams and I decided we’d wait. As soon as they left for lunch, Mr. Williams quietly went over, measured the additional eighteen inches, and moved the string! When the crew returned from lunch, they didn’t notice a thing, or if they did, they said not a word but went straight to work. We got our way,” she added, “the Irv Williams way.”

At 11:28 A.M. on Saturday, March 31, the president’s



schedule was unceremoniously interrupted by an off-the-record meeting with Major General Chester V. Clifton. Mrs. Mellon's "hoe" had sliced through an unknown buried cable—the hot line that set off the nation's military alert. The secrecy around the incident caused a frenzy, and the *New York Times* sent their reporters scrambling for a lead. On April 2 the *Times* reported, "An atomic war alert ended in seconds. Faulty alert sent planes to runway." The president later privately joked that now they finally knew where that cable was, and the work continued.

During the first weeks of April the irrigation system was installed and the Katherine crab apples were planted. The next step was to dig up the central portion of the garden to a depth of four feet and fill it with rich planting soil. A backhoe loader leveled the soil to grade and the lawn was tilled and sodded. The osmanthus hedge was planted along the colonnade to enclose the president's walkway, and the steps were framed. Dwarf boxwood was set along the edges of the lawn and in the two parallel flower beds in its zigzag pattern. The president kept a close and watchful eye as the beds were planted with flowers.

On April 24 the garden was officially finished, but everyone kept working. Mr. Williams said they wanted the

garden "to be as lovely as it could be." And for him, that would be for another forty-six years. Though everything seemed to proceed smoothly, there were some aggravations. Mrs. Mellon had her share of meddlers in the form of unwanted trees and plants that mysteriously appeared overnight. To address the situation, Mrs. Kennedy wrote a letter to Captain Tazewell T. Shepard, Naval Aide to the President, that read, "I would appreciate it if the entire care and planning of the grounds would be left completely to Mr. Williams. I do not think he needs any advice as the plans Mrs. Mellon and he have formed could not be improved upon." That seemed to halt the incursion of interlopers.

In the 1960s, greenhouse space at the White House was nonexistent (there is little more today), and to meet the need for dedicated space to support the garden's floral displays, Mrs. Mellon found an area adjacent to the nearby Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens (where Mr. Williams had worked as chief horticulturist) large enough for several greenhouses. But when the bids for the greenhouse contract came in, Mrs. Mellon's favored greenhouse company, Lord & Burnham, was not the lowest bidder. This may be a non-issue in the private sector, but it presents a formidable hurdle in the government sector. Once again, Mrs. Kennedy stepped in and dealt swiftly with the matter, writing to Conrad Wirth, director of the National Park Service, on November 30, 1962: "Mrs. Mellon is the member of my Fine Arts Committee who is the advisor on all gardens, plantings, etc. here. Could you do me an enormous favor and discuss the present situation with her? What I would hope is this. . . the contract was only signed for one greenhouse—can we get that one finished and, then, switch to Lord and Burnham?" According to Mr. Williams, the greenhouses, or "potting structures," as he called them, were built by Lord & Burnham—in his opinion the "Cadillac" of greenhouses.

When the garden was completed, President Kennedy wanted "the world" to see it and used it as the backdrop for important events. On April 9, 1963, for instance, he presided with relish and fanfare over the bestowing of honorary United States citizenship on Sir Winston Churchill, whom he called, "a son of America." Former White House curator Jim Ketchum recorded his recollections of the event:



After Mrs. Mellon finished overseeing her redesign of the Rose Garden in 1962, not only was the area a great favorite of JFK's, but he soon scheduled ceremonies, announcements, etc. for the space. The Churchill citizenship ceremony was held in late morning on a sunny spring day with tulips in full bloom and flowering ornamentals adding frosting to the cake. The garden was very crowded with standees spilling over onto the walkway that connected the Mansion to the West Wing. I remember looking out from the walkway as President Kennedy introduced Randolph Churchill, who was accepting the honor on behalf of his father. Undoubtedly, JFK's love of the Garden and its potential as a stage for ceremonial events, coupled with the colorful beds of spring flowers, made it a natural setting for the Churchill ceremony.

Congresswoman Lindy Boggs recalled her moment with President Kennedy in the Rose Garden: "We went out to the little garden. He remarked on what a restful, lovely respite from his thinking and his duties that garden had become for him. And he said, 'The chrysanthemums have been so beautiful. Lindy, how long do chrysanthe-



mums stay in bloom?' He was reluctant to have them go away. And I said, 'Well, until the frost comes, usually.'"

The bounty of the garden served an unexpected and bittersweet purpose following that fateful November day. For President Kennedy's funeral services, Mrs. Mellon worked with the White House florists to create floral arrangements for the East Room of the White House, the Rotunda in the U.S. Capitol, and Cathedral of St. Matthew, and for his grave she filled a willow basket with cuttings from the garden. For all the years that he worked at the White House, Irvin Williams continued this practice on the anniversary of the president's death. He filled a small basket with flowers from the Rose Garden, took it to Arlington Cemetery, and laid it on the president's grave.

Senator Robert F. Kennedy revealed the impact that the garden had on his brother when he wrote, "Mrs. Mellon had made everything cheerful and pleasant," and he told her, "President Kennedy spent more time worrying about the Rose Garden and how the two of you were going to handle it than he did about the Cuban Missile Crisis or Berlin."

It became clear that Mrs. Mellon's Rose Garden would stand the test of time when Lady Bird Johnson recorded her first guided tour as First Lady in her diary: "I pointed out President Kennedy's magnolia *soulangeana*, the *gaillardia*,



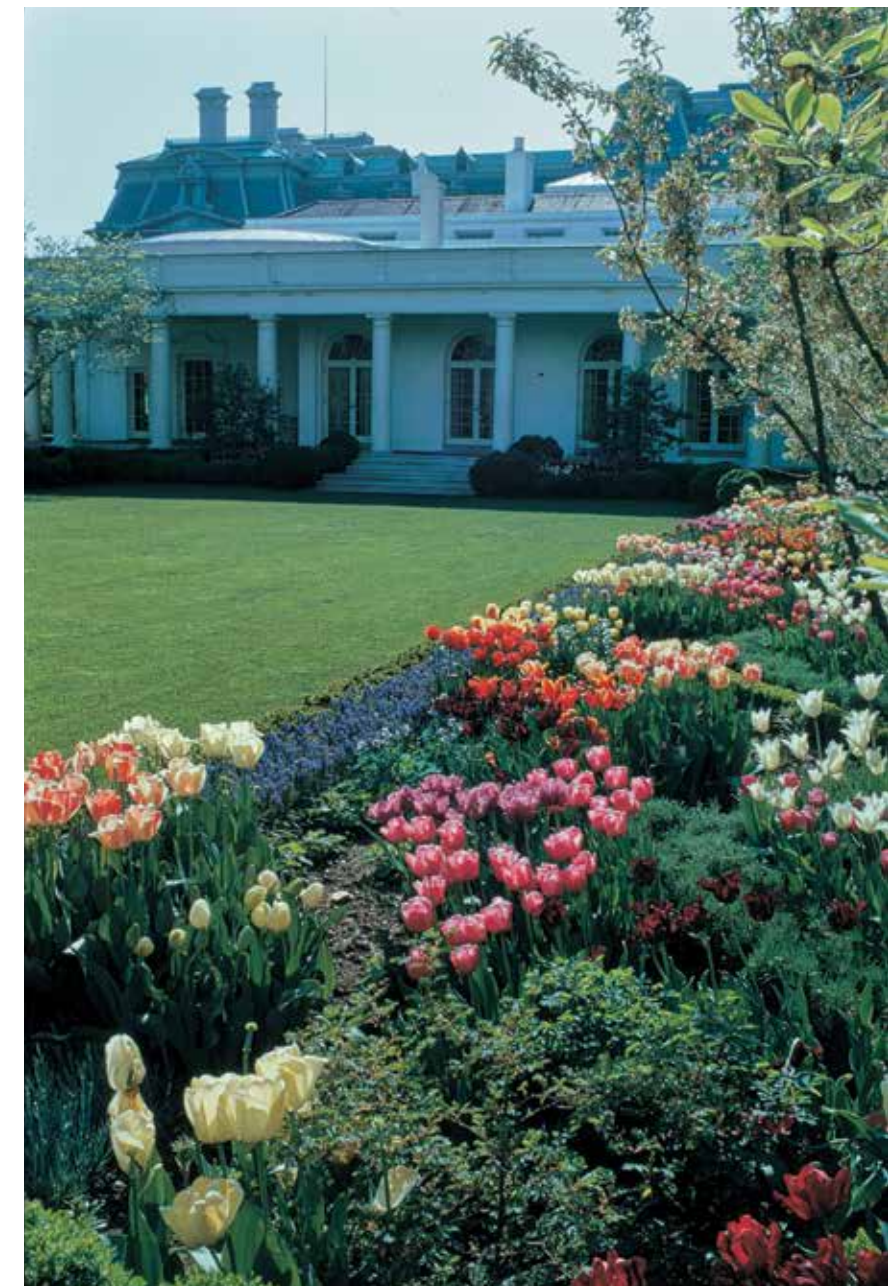
or Indian blanket that grows in masses wild in Texas in the spring, the gloriosa daisies which are a fabulous flash of color in all four corners of the garden this summer, the white roses for which the garden is named but which really are very few in number, and the lovely asters.”

Twenty years later Mrs. Mellon was still getting calls from the White House. In an exchange with Nancy Reagan on June 14, 1981, they discussed the aging Katherine crab apples. Mrs. Reagan asked her what could be done about them. Mrs. Mellon wrote back, “I am sorry to have taken so long to replace the Rose Garden. . . . Perhaps we should take advantage of the age and feeling of the old crab apples, rather than replant the garden as it was twenty years ago . . . remove the large cumbersome front hedge and put in a lower, more delicate one. . . . The two hollies in front of the President’s office should be removed. This Mr. Williams will do as soon as possible to let in light.”

And, as she was always thinking about ways to

improve the garden, she added, “In fall we will make a new planting plan—very little can grow with the apple tree shade and roots. . . . I would like to change it a little in feeling, adding more gray plants and a few older white roses—with lovely lilies that would be blooming in June. It was so kind of you to ask me to redo it—and I hope that the great interest that President Kennedy had to create it will go another step forward in continuing it with President Reagan. I will do my best to add or subtract ideas that have occurred during the long interval. Having talked to you and meeting the President the other day, one wants it to be the best ever.”

Since that time, Irvin Williams says, the Katherine crab apples “grew so well that they ended up shading the flower display.” The canopy of shade they created made it necessary to restage the garden to maximize “the show”—the seasonal floral display. The roses were moved to the front of the beds, to “reach the sun and for effect.” The garden-



ers began to put the plants in pots so they could quickly be exchanged for fresher ones. And in 2007 the old crab apples were finally replaced. The new ones were transplanted from the sandy soil of New Jersey and initially struggled to generate fibrous roots. They flowered only a little the first year, but by the third year they were thriving.

When Mrs. Mellon was encouraged to redraw her Rose Garden design for posterity's sake, she did it reluctantly. "It is a bore to go back and redo something. . . . All I really care about is that it turns out well. Then I can turn to the next." As she was fond of saying, "There is not too much that can be said about a garden. Its greatest reality is not a reality, for a garden, hovering always in a state of becoming, sums up its own past and its future."



PAGE 244: Kennedy performed a “happy duty” when he conferred American citizenship on Sir Winston Churchill on April 9, 1963, in the Rose Garden.

PAGE 245 LEFT: John F. Kennedy Jr. in his father’s garden.

PAGE 245 RIGHT: Caroline Kennedy riding her pony, Macaroni, on the South Lawn while her father’s new garden was under construction.

PAGE 246 LEFT: The president and his young son share a quiet moment on the colonnade outside the Oval Office.

PAGE 246 RIGHT: President Kennedy conferring with his brother Robert on the colonnade outside the Oval Office before Bunny’s redesign of the Rose Garden.

PAGE 247, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Tulips in full bloom; each of the ten crab apple trees in the

beds bordering the lawn was underplanted with seasonal flowers and a diamond-shaped border of santolina; the north flower bed in autumn, looking toward the West Wing; yellow tulips brighten the flower beds in spring; the intricate pattern Bunny designed for the beds bordering the lawn is clearly visible from this vantage point; President Kennedy requested a lawn large enough to hold a thousand people.

PAGES 248–49: The crab apple trees in full bloom.

PAGE 249 RIGHT: The crab apple trees just about to bloom.

OPPOSITE: The bed on the south side of the Rose Garden with the Old Executive Office Building in the background.

ABOVE: The bed on the north side of the lawn in the fall.