



GARDEN SECRETS *of* BUNNY MELLON

HOLDEN, LLOYD,
AND HUFFMAN

\$32.00 U.S.



GARDEN SECRETS *of* BUNNY MELLON

LINDA JANE HOLDEN, THOMAS LLOYD, AND BRYAN HUFFMAN

Foreword by P. ALLEN SMITH



CONTENTS

Foreword by P. Allen Smith ... 8

Preface ... 10

Introduction ... 15

RACHEL LAMBERT MELLON'S STORY ... 23

Kennedy Rose Garden Unfolds ... 36

BUNNY'S GARDEN STANDARDS ... 43

Planning and Measuring for Your Garden ... 52

Atmosphere ... 64

Light and Shadow ... 82

Space ... 88

Insights on Insects ... 104

THE IMPORTANCE OF TREES ... 107

FLOWERS AND EDIBLES ... 135

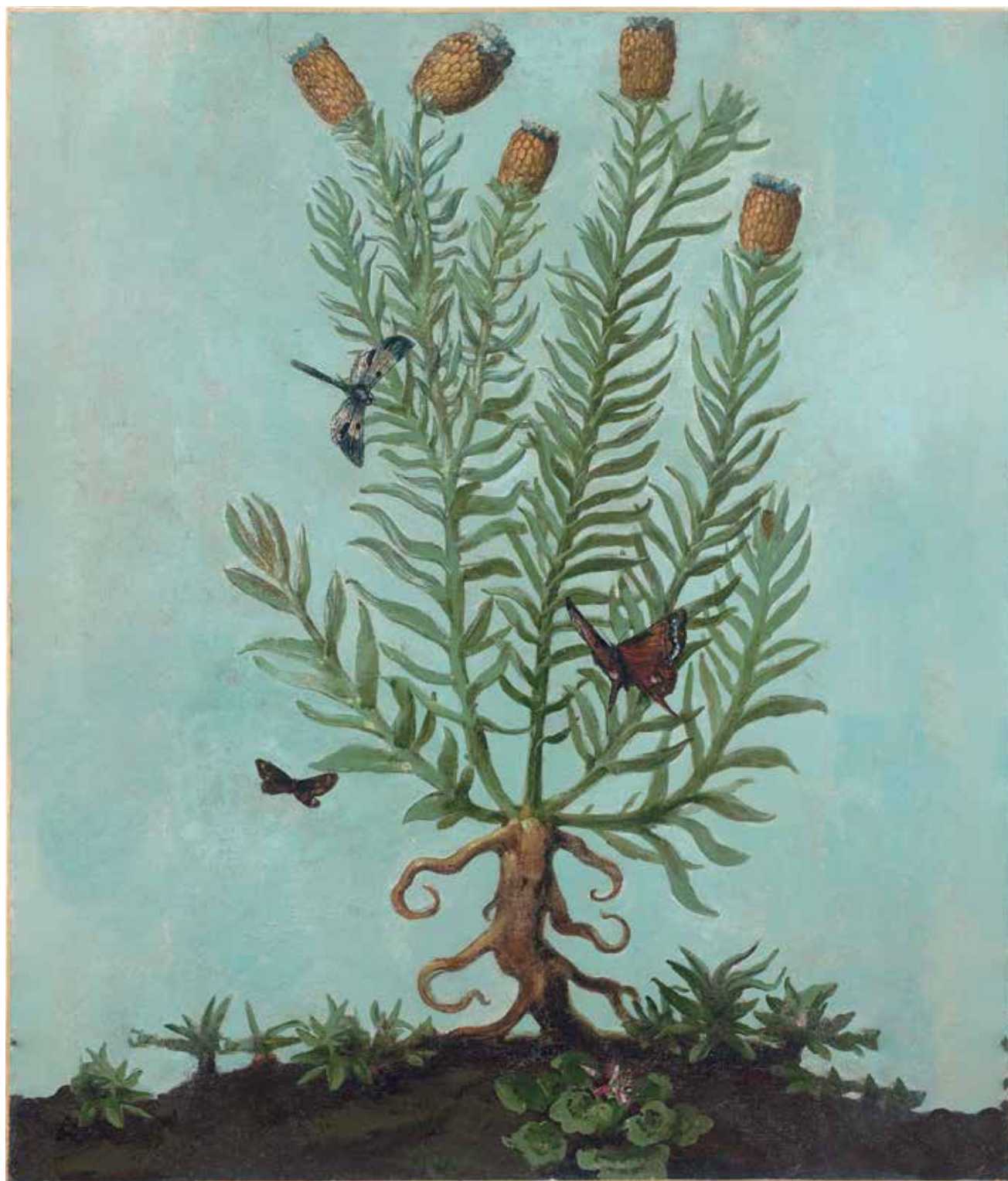
BUNNY'S LITTLE HERB TREES ... 153

IN SUMMARY ... 161

Afterword by Randy Embrey ... 164

Acknowledgments ... 174

Photographic Credits ... 175



INTRODUCTION

*“I want to write a garden book but haven’t had time.
It would be short. A few suggestions that would
encourage beginners and a few warnings not to overdo.”*

*B*unny Mellon’s personal legacy began in a garden, and it is here that she began to develop her horticultural standards. She wrote in the preface of *An Oak Spring Sylva: A Selection of the Rare Books on Trees in the Oak Spring Garden Library* that her earliest memory of the beauty and harmony of the natural world began “near a bed of tall white phlox in her godmother’s garden,” and it was this “towering forest of scent and white flowers” that became the “beginning of a ceaseless interest, passion and pleasure in gardens and books.” For as long as she could remember, she’d never been without a plant or something growing. For Bunny, seeds were a “wonderment.”

In 1916, when she was just six years old, Bunny asked her father, Gerard Lambert, for a plot of ground at Albemarle, their family estate in Princeton, New Jersey. Mr. Lambert had taken great interest in the gardens and hired the best landscape company of the day, the Olmsted Brothers, to tend the vast grounds. In response to his young daughter’s request, a “handkerchief”-size plot of land was marked out and she began to toil in her own bit of earth, working things out for herself. She plopped a birdbath in the center, “borrowed” a rosebush from her mother’s garden, and “just went from there.”



Some of Bunny's Notes and Tips:

- *Allow plants to roam a bit—like flax, daisies, columbine, phlox—like clouds that float over an organized design.*
- *Paris garden marvelous. Lavender in tubs important. Trees kept as low as possible to hide the street.*
- *Order white and pale pink peonies—no dark red—for next year. Check roses. Put order in June this year.*
- *Scillas are blooming with crocus. Look lovely in apple orchard with white and pink lavender crocus. Trees being pruned. Much better job this year.*
- *Things essential to gardening must be kept in one place.*
- *Subscribe to horticultural, organic gardening magazines—and read reference books like this!*
- *A low cement wall with clipped boxwood planted in front makes a good raised bed and is a less expensive option.*
- *Strips of rawhide are the best thing for tying an espalier tree. It gives with the weather and rarely cuts the bark.*
- *Lilies are better planted in pots than in the garden. Mark lilies in gardens for winter so they won't be uprooted.*
- *Flowers for September in Virginia: zinnia, white cosmos, large sun flowers, nigella, Persian jewels, Queen Anne's lace.*
- *Put lots of salvia pitcheri under canvas at Basket House—last longer and blue is beautiful. Can withstand cold weather and frost.*
- *Antigua plants: black willow, white wood, white cedar, ficus, acacia, cinnamon, bay rum, myrtle lime, wild lime, mahogany.*

Pastel shades of allium and foxglove blossom in springtime beside the garden wall.



RACHEL LAMBERT MELLON'S STORY

“Being very small near a bed of tall white phlox in my godmother’s garden . . . was the beginning of ceaseless interest, passion, and pleasure in gardens and books.”

Once upon a time there was a Bunny who gardened at the White House during an era that became known as Camelot. It was June 1961. A young and energetic John F. Kennedy, America’s 35th president, and his wife, Jackie, had just returned from a trip abroad that included a visit to Louis XIV’s sumptuous gardens at the Palace of Versailles. President Kennedy had been deeply moved by the carefully orchestrated diplomatic events—particularly the solemn moments in the garden framed by the stunning grandeur of the horticultural displays, light shows, and spiraling fountains. At the time, Bunny Mellon wrote in her journal that the president had keenly felt “the subtle influences of nature on the human mind” and had begun to realize that there was nothing that rivaled the botanical caliber of the French at the White House. Not surprisingly, it wasn’t too long before Kennedy turned to his trusted friend, Bunny Mellon, the amateur gardener who had admitted to having “no experience in formal studies,” and asked her to make an American garden for him at the White House.

This is a story about that amateur gardener, Bunny Mellon, who had “wanted to write a book about gardening but didn’t have time.” “Each day,” she said, “it becomes more clear that I must write. The awareness of nature is a gift,” and “one is never at a loss for pleasure.”

THE KENNEDY ROSE GARDEN UNFOLDS

Bunny and President Kennedy shared a mutual admiration for America's third president, Thomas Jefferson. While living in the White House, Jefferson had lined windowsills with potted geraniums and kept a running list of vegetables available in the nearby market while making revisions to the building itself. John Kennedy wasn't lining any windowsills with plants, but he was concocting a project that would require a transformation of the old Rose Garden, which filled the space between the White House residence and the West Wing. This plot was first gardened by First Lady Edith Roosevelt. It was a space that had opened up after a sprawl of greenhouses had been demolished, creating way for her husband Teddy's new office building, the West Wing. A couple of administrations later, the same outdoor space was redesigned by First Lady Ellen Wilson, who filled it with roses and renamed it accordingly. From then on, other than the weekly mowing and trimming, Ellen's garden was largely ignored for the next forty years by successive presidents Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower.

Kennedy's plan covered new ground. He wanted to stretch the proverbial walls of the Oval Office into the garden, creating a green theater—

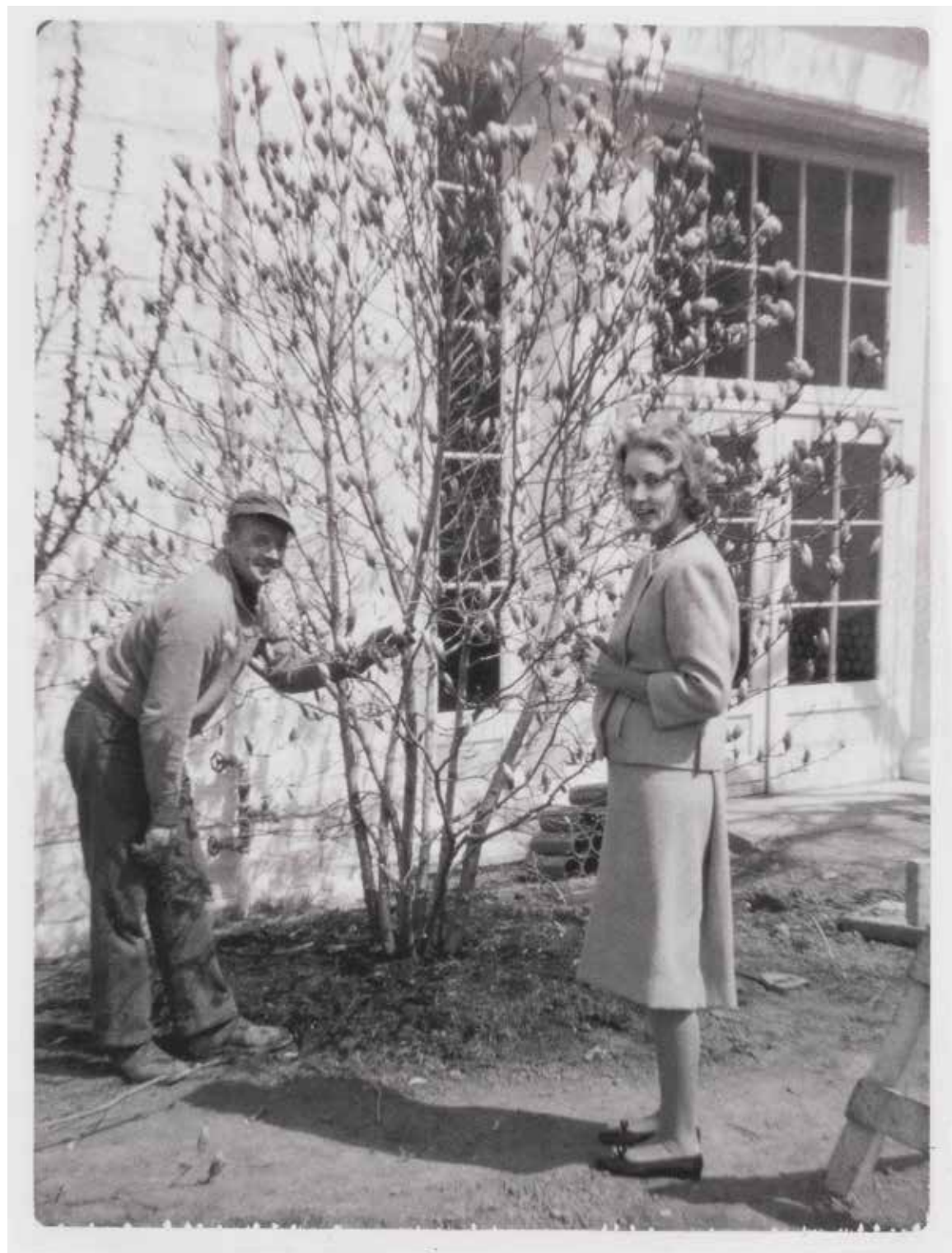
an outdoor stage—where he would showcase his ideas and parade his triumphant New Frontier policies before the American people on a worldwide scale. His “precise and clear” request for a new garden became for Bunny Mellon a labor of love. And for Kennedy? Well, over time the garden became known as President Kennedy's Rose Garden, and through the advent of television sealed his place in political history as up-and-coming television networks beamed their nightly newscasts into America's living rooms, replete with staged images of the president at work in the lushly planted garden.

It was Bunny Mellon who had quietly made it all happen. Her process seemed doable; her standards of garden design thoughtful, exacting, and straight to the point. Even President Kennedy seemed to enjoy watching the project unfold and appreciated how she got things done. One can only imagine how the keenly observant Kennedy had probably wished his capable friend would also agree to take a seat at the Cabinet table, too.

Kennedy was in a hurry to begin, and at his request, Bunny visited the Rose Garden site to analyze the existing space and evaluate the setting. From where she sat that first day under Andrew Jackson's overgrown magnolia trees studying the area all around, she remembered thinking, “This end of the White House looked like a pale man staring into space.” The coat of white paint



In the northern flower bed of the Rose Garden at the White House, 'Katherine' crabapples planted in repeating diamonds of santolina are surrounded by flowers in season.



that Teddy Roosevelt had splashed over the old sandstone walls created a harsh, sterile effect. Being solution oriented, Bunny's thoughts turned toward remedies and the need to "soften all that white." Likewise, she had to decide on a boundary, because she always designed a "landscape with fixed horizons, whether it be mountains or a stone wall." And if there wasn't a set boundary, then she would have to create one. The Rose Garden is hemmed in on three sides by the West Wing, the connecting colonnade, and the White House. The remaining side opens to the south lawn with the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial in the sight line.

Bunny's next step was to develop a plan that, of course, included the president's wish list and remained true to the historical site itself. It was a short list that included a lawn area large enough for the president to host up to a thousand people for receptions, awards of merit ceremonies, and press conferences. He wanted colorful flowers in season and a set of new steps that would function more as a platform than a set of steps. And, finally, he wanted a garden that "would return to the peace and silence of a private garden" when all those people had left.

Landscape design, "like all design, is personal. It is the expression of the people involved." The landscape "must put together things of nature that correspond to the person as well as to the place and

environment. It must inspire, calm, and please," and, in this case, contribute to the "president's well-being." This involved creating "an overall outline," what she called "the 'bone structure.'" It was the most important element," she wrote in her article "President Kennedy's Garden" for the White House Historical Association's journal *White House History*. "You begin with the skeleton sketch, a general pleasing outline, or form, and proceed from there. Within this structure, you can make subdivisions as you choose, more complicated or more detailed than the general form." She noted the space, took measurements, observed the movement of the sun, where the light shined in the day and where the shadows fell at dusk. She calculated potential difficulties, anticipated solutions, gathered her team, and—following her own set of garden design standards—began.

Mrs. Mellon hired Irvin Williams away from the National Park Service and Everett Hicks from the Davey Tree Company. Local D.C. landscape architect Perry Wheeler rounded out the Mellon team. All three men were experts in their fields. Friendships among Bunny and these men, forged in the garden, lasted several lifetimes.

OPPOSITE: Bunny Mellon with her arborist, Everett Hicks, planting a *Magnolia x soulangeana* in the Rose Garden at the White House.



BUNNY'S GARDEN STANDARDS

*“To become a good gardener, you have to
spend time every day in the garden.”*

Bunny's garden standards are a result of her daily discipline of spending time in her gardens, pushing through the ups and downs, celebrating the successes and coping with the failures—all of which equal the sum total of any gardener's experience, or anyone learning a new trade, for that matter. While Bunny considered all of her standards to be of the utmost importance, time spent in the garden was probably her number-one unspoken rule. If you don't show up, then what's the point?

One day, a friend, Babe Paley, came to her Oak Spring farm to learn about gardening and landscape design. Babe and her husband, William Paley, were in the throes of building a new estate on Long Island, and she looked to Bunny for advice. After a couple of days spent at the farm, Bunny let Babe in on this little secret: *To become a good gardener, you have to spend time every day in the garden*—which meant she'd have to curtail her social life. This was an incomprehensible thought, a foreign concept, to a woman who topped the New York City social register. Babe fled home to New York and sent her gardener back to Oak Spring instead.

The pages of the garden book that Bunny drafted in her journals were probably intended for friends like Babe. “It would be short,” she said, most likely hoping it would actually be read. “A few suggestions that would encourage beginners and a few warnings not to



ABOVE: The road that Bunny designed to pass through the flower-laden arbor between the garden and library to reach the east side of the farm.

OPPOSITE: Shadows and light paint a lattice design on the path below the arbor that connects the garden with the Formal Greenhouse.

overdo. No matter how you start, you will change your ideas with experience. If you are sincerely interested in the subject, experience will carry you along. Sometimes with disappointments, but they too sharpen and further your knowledge as you search for a replacement or another approach.”

Even after President Kennedy’s death, Bunny carried on and continued to dig in the Rose Garden, prune the trees, pull weeds, and give advice as the White House gardeners, successive presidents, and first ladies alike continued to reach out to her. And now, almost sixty years later,

the garden speaks for itself. It has stood the test of time, remaining faithful to Bunny’s original plan, which was crafted on the strength of her garden standards.

The standards that she adhered to and her thoughts on these standards—the importance of making a garden plan, measuring, the considerations of atmosphere, horizons, sight lines, light, space, and shadows—were recorded throughout her journal writings.

“Before planning a garden, find out how the garden or space to be landscaped will be used.”





Ask questions that are fundamental to the site. Where is the garden located? Where is the horizon? What are the sight lines and where are the boundaries? Is there a water supply? What is the climate? What is the soil composition and what amendments are necessary? What does the existing space allow for? “What is natural and in harmony with the existing building and countryside?” “Where does the wind come from that is harsh in winter? In summer, where does the house

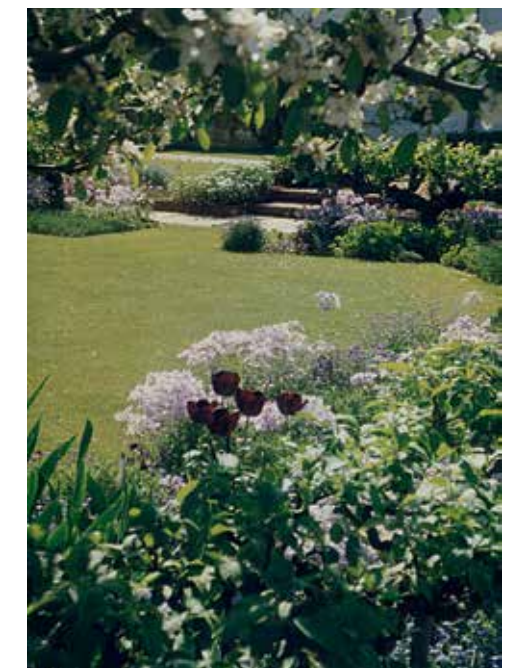
cast shadows?” “What will the upkeep require?” What exists—a garage, a large tree? And what do you want? What are you most interested in? There is no use in “designing a garden that will lose its shape and design in a few years.”



OPPOSITE: The wishing well on the Lower Terrace near a vegetable patch filled with greens ready for harvest. The Basket House and School House are in the background.

ABOVE: A view of the Lower Terrace in the Oak Spring Garden facing northeast. Flourishing cordons line the garden paths.

RIGHT: Spring, a favorite time in the garden, when the deep red of the tulips subtly enhances the beauty of the square garden at Oak Spring.





OPPOSITE: The Upper Terrace and square garden of the Oak Spring Garden.

ABOVE: The garden at Cape Cod was located a short distance from the house and enclosed by a tall hedge to buffet it from the ocean winds. A sundial punctuates the point where two garden paths crisscross. The drying shed is to the left and the greenhouse to the right.



ABOVE: The Cape Cod garden in spring is being prepared for summer's floral show. In the background is the Drying Shed, where flowers were hung from the rafters for drying.

OPPOSITE: The Cape Cod garden in full bloom at the height of summer. Whimsical weather vanes crowned the peaks of many of Bunny's buildings.



PLANNING AND MEASURING FOR YOUR GARDEN

“Gardens have been written about throughout the ages. But, like many beautiful things, one thinks they will never change—never cease to be what they are. Never die. Unfortunately, they follow the cycle of all living things—never remaining the same. It is well then to take notes that will help to remind those in later years of all they possessed—so that they may imagine, dream and perhaps recall a part of what has been.”

As you begin to design your garden, write down your thoughts, interests, and vision for the garden along with what you would like to have in your garden. Organize your ideas, take notes, and plan. “Don’t buy things at random. Like bad habits in other ways, one can start bad garden habits.”

Bunny discussed how to plan a garden in her article “The Garden Plan,” Excerpts follow on pages 54, 55 and 60:



OPPOSITE: The west side of the Upper Terrace in the Oak Spring Garden. In this photograph, Bunny has used a black marker to circle a plant that requires further attention.

ABOVE: A neat and tidy vegetable plot by one of seven barns at Rokeby Stables, where Paul Mellon raised horses for fox hunting and flat racing.



A garden should be planned as a whole, she advised.

“You may never complete your plan for twenty years, but if every bit of effort you put in is working toward the completion of a plan as a whole, you save both time and money. If someday you should wake up and decide you must have a vegetable garden, and with this inspiration, rush out and dig any old spot without thought to the future, and then, the next year you feel inspired to build a garden pool, the chances are the very place you put your vegetable garden will be the most advantageous spot for the garden pool. So that year spent in getting the soil in condition for the vegetables will be wasted as you dig it up to make the pool. However, with your big eraser, these things can be jiggled around like a Chinese puzzle.”

STEP 1: Make a list of “all your problems, such as a garage or laundry yard you want to hide, an ugly pump or a muddy walk that needs repair.”

STEP 2: “Make a second list of all the things you eventually hope to have, as cold frames, tool house, vegetable garden, etc.”

STEP 3: “Measure the actual length of your house, garden, paths, and whatever you want to know, and write these down on paper.”

“After you have all your necessary measurements, come in, put up your table by a nice fire and settle down.”

STEP 4: On the graph paper, use your measurements and “draw the outline of all existing buildings, and important trees, remembering to draw in the area that is shaded by these trees. Also mark the points of the compass, so as to be sure where the sun will be.”

STEP 5: “Next come the colored pencils.” “Make improvements or changes with an ordinary pencil . . . When you are sure of a new change it can be drawn in red.”

OPPOSITE: The grassy center path leading up to the greenhouse in the Cape Cod garden. A central workroom for the gardeners was flanked by two Lord and Burnham greenhouses.

RIGHT: Bunny Mellon was a hands-on gardener who spent time with her hired gardeners and builders working in the garden or reviewing plans—whatever the day required. She is pictured here, wearing her trademark garden hat, at her house on Nantucket.





At the Nantucket property, there was a small raised garden bed enclosed with wood fencing that was brushed in streaks with Bunny's own paint formula to give a head start to the weathering process.



ABOVE, LEFT: A working greenhouse built with slats was located near the vegetable garden in Antigua.

ABOVE, RIGHT: A view of the Antigua compound called King's Leap.

LEFT: The gardens were covered with lattice structures called "hats" to screen the tender plants from the strong heat of the midday sun.



Whether making a new garden or improving an existing one, the garden planner must first gather the necessary supplies: graph paper, “a ruler, a long measuring tape, some colored pencils, and a good eraser.” On a practical note, always measure your space. It simplifies things and prevents mistakes. Bunny worked alongside her gardeners as they planted and encouraged

them to “train your eye to measure. If you learn what three feet is in your mind’s eye, then you can imagine one foot—three feet—or six—or nine.” Then, once you’ve measured, make a little sketch so that planting will not be a “hit and miss game.” “There are rules.” Follow them. Be respectful of how much space each plant requires. Don’t overplant.

“One of the most important things to remember, if you are planning a garden, is to keep your eyes open. Driving along a road, no matter how often you have traveled it before, you may get an idea. Either what to do or what not to do. I don’t mean ever to copy someone else’s idea, for it would not give you the same pleasure as if you had thought it out for yourself. But change it around. For instance, I saw a small dilapidated barn about twenty feet high with a shed on one side. Its lines were good, and I thought what an attractive garage that would make if you used the same dimensions and design, using the loft as a workshop and the shed off one side, with its corn crib as a shelter for tools, and a place to dry herbs and such things.”



Oak Spring, the Mellon family home situated in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains, has the feeling of a French hamlet. It is comprised of numerous connected outbuildings named the Guest House, Basket House, Honey House, and School House.



Views of the Nantucket property. **OPPOSITE, ABOVE LEFT:** Waves of the Atlantic Ocean crash on the shore below Bunny's house in Nantucket. **OPPOSITE, ABOVE RIGHT:** Bunny's style was to mix flower varieties in her beds. **OPPOSITE, BELOW LEFT:** The Nantucket house was painted yellow and protected by surrounding walls. **OPPOSITE, BELOW RIGHT:** Blue-eyed grass cloaks the fields of the Nantucket property in summertime. **ABOVE:** Raised beds in the enclosed Nantucket garden.



OPPOSITE: Variations of shadow and light embellish the view across the farmlands toward the horizons.

ABOVE: Spring bursting forth in all her glory at Oak Spring.

LEFT: A stone trough where water flows from the Middle Terrace into a small pool on the Lower Terrace in Bunny's Oak Spring Garden.

LOVE OF ESPALIER

Bunny softened the weathering stone walls with trees bent in forms of espalier, which is the training of a shrub or tree into a shape by fastening the branches to a wall or support. This imparted a beguiling appearance, especially when laden with ripened fruit in season.



Trees create added interest in a garden when trained against walls and shaped into different diagonal, upright, and horizontal patterns.





The vegetable garden on the Lower Terrace at Oak Spring, freshly tilled and planted with vegetables in straight, orderly lines. Seeds for the red poppies were sent to Bunny from Gérald Van der Kemp, a French friend and art expert who masterminded the restoration of the palace at Versailles and, with Bunny's financial philanthropic support, Monet's garden at Giverny.



BUNNY'S LITTLE HERB TREES

*A garden's "greatest reality is not reality,
for it is always in a state of becoming."*

From the time Bunny was a little girl traveling back and forth to school, she was deeply aware of the string of old apple trees that her father had transplanted along both sides of the driveway at Albemarle, her childhood home in Princeton, New Jersey. For her, they represented "stability and peace" and she knew "their shapes by heart." Springtime "came with blossoms and wild violets that crept into the grass around them" and were followed by the heavy shade of summer and "autumn's red and yellow apples." Winter was the most magical time of all, when the snow was streaked with blue shadows "that moved with the sun." Her fascination with trees grew from there.

Bunny became interested in growing standards, what she referred to as "little herb trees," when the gardener at George Washington's Mount Vernon shared a clipping from a myrtle tree with her. "These little herb trees, which recall the pure quality of a medieval monastery garden, began as an experiment to create something that would be to our culture, the culture of the Western Hemisphere, what the bonsai trees are to the Eastern; to produce a living plant that had the quality of an object."

Standards, by definition, are shrub-like plants that are trained to grow as a small tree with a straight stem. All shoots are pruned or pinched back, leaving only a topknot of growth. It was the perfect plant for a tree-lover like Bunny, who loved to prune. In fact, for her, pruning her little herb trees became an art form. “As it takes about two years to make and shape an herb tree, we keep adding to this collection. By now we have a small forest.” Lucky were the friends who received one of these prized trees. “A pinched leaf of rosemary, thyme, or santolina will bring the scent of a country garden into any room; some friends who cook keep their trees in their kitchen where the trimming of the tree becomes the flavor of the stew.”

Bunny found growing these little trees to be an “astonishment” that brought great joy for many years. She wrote that watching each one of them grow called on all the resources of the gardener, “who learns to live with faith, success, disappointment, and patience.”



ABOVE: Bunny examining her little herb trees in her winter garden, the Formal Greenhouse at Oak Spring.

OPPOSITE: A brick masonry floor, sunken below the ground, is lined with her prized topiaries at Bunny's Lord and Burnham greenhouse at Oak Spring.

