

Restoring the Golden Age and Greenhouse of Planting Fields

The golden era . . . the Great Gatsby days . . . ragtime. These words all bring back visions of large estates, polished cars, beautiful people, incomprehensible wealth. Fortunately for us today, we have some tangible remains of the "good old days" and have not left ourselves to imagination and the mercy of the movie producers.

One of these tributes to the golden past is Planting Fields Arboretum in Oyster Bay, New York, former estate of W. R. Coe and his family, which has made news again recently with the restoration of the 60+ year old Camellia House, a restoration which will not only ensure a proper environment for the continued existence of a valuable plant collection, but also ensure the historic and aesthetic value of a post-Victorian structure for future generations to appreciate. The collection of Camellias within this greenhouse is one of the oldest, finest and largest in the U.S.

The Camellia House and William Robertson Coe must be thought of almost synonymously, for it was he who was responsible, even though accidentally, for its creation and its eventual design and construction. W. R. Coe started an insurance career in 1884 at the age of 15 with Johnson & Higgins, a marine insurance company, progressing through the ranks to director, president and chairman. His career is certainly a success story, but it was the wealth of his second wife, Mai Rogers Coe, whom he married in 1900, that gave the Coe name its place in the annals of American opulence. It is reported that Mai split \$150 million with her two sisters after her oil magnate father passed away in 1901; her inheritance was actually held until 1915 when she turned 40 years of age and became a very wealthy woman.

Mai's wealth was a definite factor in the construction of the estate house now known as Coe Hall in 1918, the collecting of rare and magnificent horticultural and botanical specimens for the grounds of their estate, and for their elegant and adventuresome lifestyle. Their travels took them to Wyoming in 1910 to meet Buffalo Bill and purchase his Carter ranch, the future site of the Coe's summer home, Irma Lake Lodge. In 1913 the Coes acquired Planting Fields and its mansion which would later burn down and be replaced by Coe Hall. There even followed a 11,000 acre South Carolina plantation.

The Byrnes, from whom the Coes bought Planting Fields, had little interest in horticulture and had done little to landscape the 350 acre estate. Coe therefore hired landscape architect A. R. Sargent, son of Professor Sargent of the Arnold Arboretum, in 1914 to design and supervise the planting of the grounds. Evergreens and oaks, only 4-inches high, were purchased from Conserva-

tion Department of the State of New York. Japanese crabapples and cherries were imported from Yokohama. Several thousand rhododendrons and azaleas were shipped from England and still light up the spring landscape at Planting Fields. Mai had her father's magnificent copper beeches barged across Long Island Sound and drawn by horses to Planting Fields.

The amusing incident in all of this collecting was the acquisition of the Camellia Collection from the island of Guernsey in England in 1917 by Coe at the prodding of Sargent. For the first time, certain rare varieties would be in the United States. What Coe didn't know was that the camellias could not survive outdoors in this climate, and it was only after they arrived from England that Sargent noted that Coe would "have to build a greenhouse for them".



The Camellia House at Planting Fields during the reconstruction of its framework.

HOUSING THE COLLECTION

Within a month after the camellia collection arrived, a construction drawing was prepared for the first camellia greenhouse at Planting Fields. The "enclosed garden" was nothing more than a structure hastily thrown over the clustered, potted camellias. Coe came to be very proud of his camellias, and his concern for their well being led to evolutionary improvements, some experimental and much-discussed, which have earned the Camellia House a place in American horticultural history.

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Greenhouse Restoration (cont.)

1918 brought two events that effected the development of the Camellia House: first, the Byrne mansion burned down, and some of Coe's time and energy was diverted to the construction of Coe Hall; and second, Sargent passed away, leaving the landscaping of Planting Fields and the Camellia House in the hands of Olmsted Brothers, established by Frederik Law Olmsted as the nation's foremost landscape architecture firm. Despite these set backs, Olmsted Bros., under the direction of James Dawson, project architect, was well under way to revising the greenhouse by the fall of 1918.

The greatest controversy centered on what should be done with the camellias: whether their greenhouse should be merely a winter shelter, such as an orangerie, from which potted trees would be removed in summer and returned in winter, or whether it should be a year-round house. Clearly, the original greenhouse had only been intended for the former, limited role, yet a change of thought was unfolding. Concurrently, further fuel was added to the fire while a decision was being made as to whether the camellias should stay in tubs if they were to remain indoors all year, or whether they should be planted into the ground.

After much discussion and airing of opposing views, the camellias were planted into the ground during the winter of 1919-20. Two innovations and changes in the house structure made this possible: slat rolling shades were designed and installed to cause a 10° F drop in temperature and protect the plants from excessive sun and heat; and bottom ventilators were installed low, just over the heating pipes, allowing the soil level to be raised to the necessary level for planting and supported by retaining walls. Lord & Burnham completed the installation of the ventilators and concomitant changes to the heating pipes for \$1,430.90, greatly in excess of the \$800 estimate. The Camellia House, once planted, showed a marked departure from the previous American practice of keeping camellias only as tubbed exotic plants.



Plywood was used to build a platform over the plants so work could be done on the high trusses.

The original greenhouse was 45 feet wide, 100 feet long and 27 feet wide. The size of the house was not extraordinary for its time; it is the purpose of the structure, not its size or design that makes it significant. Its historic worth is its dedication to a purpose unknown in America at the time of its construction: the raising of camellias. The Camellia House was constructed of plain, not galvanized, steel, which would later rust and buckle and be one of the causal factors for the restoration.

Since the original structure was designed only for winter protection, many modifications were made and two wings were designed to alleviate overcrowding, all by

Olmsted. These wings would later prove to have been designed poorly, pushing against the main house, and corrections were also made during restoration.

The two wings were actually built in 1922 by the William Lutton Company of Jersey City who had constructed the original house, even though Lord & Burnham came in with a lower bid. Lutton was eventually bought out by Lord & Burnham who is one of the subcontractors on the current restoration. Lutton also carried out repairs to the house after a fire destroyed much of it in 1924.

THE GOLDEN AGE BECOMES PUBLIC

The era of the great estates had ended a few decades later and become an era of subdivisions, but here and there the glory lingered on. Planting Fields was one of those fortunate exceptions. When W. R. Coe died in 1955, the estate immediately became the property of New York State through arrangements made by Coe before his death. The Planting Fields Arboretum as it came to be known was administered first by the State University of New York at Farmingdale and after 1971, by the Long Island State Parks and Recreation Commission. For close to three decades the public has been able to enjoy the graciousness of the grounds and its valuable plantings and, until recently, the Camellia House also.

In February 1980 the Camellia House was closed to the public because it was felt the building was not safe. The steel, over 60 years old, had served its purpose, leaving the greenhouse structurally weak. About one year before, Planting Fields Arboretum was registered as a district on the National Register of Historic Places and, as is usual in situations like this, structural reports on the various buildings from an architectural and engineering viewpoint were prepared. Through the report submitted for Coe Hall, Planting Fields came to work with the Preservation Partnership of Natick, MA, who would eventually be asked to prepare such a report for the Camellia House, working with the Lord & Burnham Corp., to determine if the building were economically and physically salvageable. After the study led by architectural conservator Maximilian Ferro AIA, RIBA of the Preservation Partnership was successfully completed, it was decided to start the restoration of the Camellia House. Mr. Ferro advised restoration of the House rather than building a new structure as it would be less costly and preserve the historic structure as well.

Even from the start, problems were encountered, the first of them being funding. After being turned down by the State for funds, the Planting Fields Foundation pro-

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Greenhouse Restoration (cont.)

posed matching funds with the State to come up with the early estimates of \$500,000 needed for the restoration. The legislature agreed, only to leave the Foundation to raise another \$288,000 when early estimates proved to be too low.

Carol Nelson, design architect from Preservation Partnership, set to writing the specifications. Her primary goal was to re-create the Camellia House in all its aspects so it would look exactly the same and retain its historic and aesthetic appeal. Early plans to remove the wood and steel, sand blast and return the steel, and then rebuild the wood were rejected. The House was to be torn down to its framework, the original steel rebuilt or replaced to the tune of \$100,000 and the wooden section replaced with aluminum. The aluminum was not only lower in price than custom wood, it would be more durable and require less maintenance. The goals were met: the House would be restored, keep its historic configuration, and renovated with modern metal.

The original Camellia House had been designed to be particularly tall to achieve the necessary air movement and high humidity the camellias required. Replacing the trusses necessitated construction of a plywood platform, designed by the general contractor, Walsh Construction of Floral Park, which doubled as a protective cover for the plants. Being 80 years old, the camellias could not be dug from the ground without chance of loss or damage, so all work went on working around the plants left in place. Construction started in April 1982. Since most of the glass had to be removed, and although original plans called for a fall completion date, it was well into winter before the work was done. Fortunately, the weather was mild until mid-December and the plywood platform in effect closed the plants off to the weather. The camellias weren't as magnificent their first spring as usual for the darkness and activity around them, but one would expect that. They are alive and well to carry on the tradition of the oldest collection of its kind on the East Coast.

Attention was paid to detail throughout renovation. For example, the architect wanted to reuse the wooden gutters, which proved impossible as they were too rotted. They were remade of aluminum, creating the right atmosphere and adding the "perfect" finish to the job. Lord & Burnham replaced the entire roof and the ground glass to be just as the original was designed. One change from the original is that the glass on the south side of the house is frosted while the north side glass is clear. This creates a better environment for the plants and lowers maintenance as no shading needs to be applied.

Historic gardens and horticultural collections have usually fared far worse than historic mansions, which can stand much longer periods of neglect and abuse. We all have the Coe family and Planting Fields Arboretum to thank for caring for this remarkable collection and to now make its further preservation possible. It is a fitting symbol and tribute to a great family who should be thought of as contributors to beauty and appreciation of that beauty and not as industrial robber barons. The golden age of Planting Fields will live on thanks to today's society that realizes the value of preserving the past for the appreciation of the present and education of the future. On February 4, the House was reopened and dedicated to the memory of Mai Rogers Coe. The Arboretum's next hurdle is the restoration of the main greenhouse, a visitors' favorite.

MIMULUS

Mimulus is a crop with which most people are unfamiliar. It is tolerant to low temperatures, responsive to B-9, dwarf-hybrid, low-growing, can be grown in packs, pots, beds and hanging baskets. It requires long days (13 hour days or longer) to flower.

In California first bloom occurred in 52 days from seeding while as few as 42 days were required in the U.K.

There are nearly 600,000 seed per ounce so one must be careful when sowing the seed. Germination only takes two to five days at 75°F. It is generally suggested the seedlings be pricked out into the final container about one to two weeks after sowing.

CULTURAL INFORMATION

Sowing Date: Mimulus require a 13-hour day to initiate flowers, so there is no point in sowing in the autumn or early winter. Sow three to four weeks before 13-hour days commence in your location for maximum efficiency. In the U.K. sowing in late February and early March should give flowering plants in April. Later sowings will take about six to seven weeks to flower.

Seed Sowing: Mimulus seed is small. Broadcast thinly onto the surface of moist compost and cover lightly. Germinate at 15° to 20°C (59° to 68°F).

Pricking Out: Prick out direct into the final containers, using a low nutrient compost, and keep moist. Mimulus are ideal for growing in cell packs, open trays or as pot plants in 9-cm (3½-in.) pots.

Growing On: Keep plants moist and cool. Frost protection 2°C (36°F) is all that is required at night to produce top quality plants. Higher temperatures progressively lead to soft growth and longer internodes. When it is not possible to provide consistently low temperatures, the use of a growth regulator is advisable.

Growth Regulator: Excellent results have been achieved with both B-9 and cycocel. Cycocel is preferable, however, as it also advances flowering slightly and darkens and hardens the foliage. Spray to runoff at 600 ppm. A single application only is needed and this is best applied at the four-leaf stage. *L. I. Horticulture News*

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