

A Little Fall Detour

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It was a glorious autumn day when I pulled out of the parking garage at the Oakbrook, Il., Hyatt Regency. I had completed my talks by 11:30 a.m. and was on the way home. Much work awaited me there, thanks to the boxes of fall bulbs the UPS man had dropped off in recent weeks. I had promised Mrs. A. Hort Hound that I would stop off at a nearby discount clothing store in Lombard to look for a new suit, but this wouldn't take long, given the time I typically devoted to this kind of shopping.

Much to my misfortune, as I came to Roosevelt Road (the Devil made me do it), I turned left, not right, towards Lombard! Meandering without purpose (ha ha!) along the road as it passed through Wheaton, it wasn't long before my quadcab mysteriously found itself at the entrance to the Gardener's Palette in Winfield.

Amazed at how misfortune had become good fortune, I proceeded to poke around the nursery's 22 acres. This is a first class garden center, it even has its own monogrammed plastic floor coverings for the car. Very appropriate for the white Lexus and the black Mercedes parked on my left and right respectively, but it hardly matters if you are driving a pickup truck.

I spent a good half-hour going through the clay pots on the sales table. If you know me, that's hard to imagine, only a half an hour, that is. You see, there were a number of Illinois potters represented who do very nice work. I was not familiar with them, but I am happy to report, that is no longer the case.

Most of the perennials were past their prime, including flats of pansies for only \$9.00. Large pots of mums, however, were spectacular. There must have been 20 different colors from which to choose. If you are ever looking for one of those gargantuan hanging baskets of trailing mums to hang at the gatehouse to your lakeshore villa, this is the place!

After another 30 minutes, I satisfied my craving for a mum fix, carefully selecting three beautiful plants. I was especially taken with the variety called 'Helen' that was the color of the finest Merlot.

I then had a "brief" discussion with the manager on duty and we discussed topics ranging from the history of the nursery to the unusual yellow flowering trumpet vine with its bean-like fruits outside the first hoop house. She was the one who insisted that I proceed on to Cantigny just a mile or so away to see their fall display of mums, the best in the area.

Leaving the parking lot with the cab suffused with the scent of mum foliage, I actually toyed with the idea of heading over to the Morton Arboretum for a very late lunch in their wonderful café overlooking the pond. Exercising extreme willpower once again, I managed to reach the gates to Cantigny Park. I would just be there an hour or so at most.

For those of you who have never had the pleasure of visiting Cantigny (pronounced Can-teeny, the g is silent), you should treat yourself to a visit sometime. The park is the estate of the late Colonel Robert McCormick. This is not the McCormick family of spice or reaper fame, but the owners of the Chicago Tribune. As it turns out, Cantigny is also the name of a village in France where a famous World War I battle was fought in 1918. And as you might have guessed, Colonel McCormick was one of the combatants.

As I entered the visitors center at the entrance to the gardens, I was delighted to discover that the Prairie State Bonsai Society was having its annual show and sale. I tried to pass by quickly, but several magnificent specimens (well all right, it was more than several) caught my eye. Then I had to go through the sales area, after taking note of the winners of the competition, of course.

I regretfully report that the mums were not quite at their peak. There were large pots of the trailing varieties on poles lining many of the walks. Vast hedgerows of *Euonymus alata* (burning bush) were at their fiery-pink best. Other wonderful woodies were just beginning to show fall color.

Cantigny is noted for its display of annuals in its formal gardens, and they did not disappoint. I appreciated the fact that the plants were well labeled so I could take a few notes on what I was looking at. The piece de resistance, which actually took my breath away, was an enormous planting of *Salvia coccinea* which mixed together the three varieties 'Coral Nymph', 'Lady in Red', and 'Snow Nymph'. Graham Rice, in his book **Discovering Annuals**, has this to say about this salvia: "*Salvia coccinea* is a scarlet salvia, but in a more comely style than most red bedding salvias, which have the bloated arrogance of an

undersized bouncer in a seedy basement club. In contrast, ‘Lady in Red’, the pink and white ‘Coral Nymph’, and ‘Snow Nymph’ have the assured elegance of the dancers we’re standing in line to see.”

At Cantigny, these were backed by a large border of the common *Salvia farinacea* ‘Blue bedder’ and Petunia ‘Celebrity Burgundy’. Talk about color in the garden! There was another gorgeous bedding scheme of *Gomphrena globosa* ‘Strawberry Fields’ and lavender *Verbena bonariensis*. The *Gomphrena* is a striking, relatively new orange-red cultivar which is spectacular in dried arrangements. There were mass plantings of Solenostemons (*Coleus*) everywhere including those of *S. duckfoot* ‘Dark Red’ and, of course, one of my favorites, *S. ‘Cantigny Royal’* with its tiny leafed foliage, nearly black when grown in strong light. I took note of more “new” annuals for me—*Abelmoschus* ‘Pacific mix’ (mallow family), *Stobilanthus* ‘Brazilian shield’ (striking deep green foliage with silver markings, often sold as a house plant) *Angelonia* ‘Purple Stripe’ (Brazil), *Ageratum* ‘Hawaii Pink Shell’, and a low and compact *Scaevola* ‘New Wonder Blue’. I hope Mark Dwyer, of the Janesville Rotary Garden is reading this. It would be nice to see some of these in the gardens “unusual annuals” section at next Spring’s sale. Definitely some interesting plant material!

They did have a nice display of grasses, but they compared poorly to the display in the perennial garden at Olbrich. There were quite a few autumn flowering Colchicums on display. Did many of you hear Steve Lesch’s great bulb talk to the Hosta Society in September? Hold on to your hats, but he told us that he had over 1,500 Colchicums currently blooming in his garden, representing 25 different varieties. Ok, Steve, how many of these can you really tell apart, reticulations or no reticulations? Oh, all right, anyone can pick out *C. ‘Giganteum’*, which you told us was the size of an auto tire. (Steve is never guilty of hyperbole.)

Needless to say, I didn’t have any time for the 45-minute tour of the McCormick Mansion or the war museum also on the Cantigny grounds.

It is a little hazy in my mind as to exactly what time I got back on the road for home, but I thoroughly enjoyed the track north on Hwy 59 through Dupage County and extreme northwestern Cook County. Did you know there are still fields of soy beans in Cook County—I saw them!) The roadside golden rod, purple asters, and tall yellow heliniums were spectacular.

Every once in a while there was a patch of pampas grass waving its silvery inflorescences in the brisk northeasterly breezes. I know that this is an invasive weed to some, but I still remember the dramatic, almost magical impact it had during the month of October along the eastern reaches of the Pennsylvania Turnpike when basking in the late afternoon sunshine.

As I approached Rockford and the E. Riverside Blvd. exit, fully absorbed in the stereophonic sounds of the grand march scene from Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*, I imagined that I had been invited to the Anderson Garden for an evening stroll with wine and canapés. Wouldn’t that have been a glorious finish to a glorious afternoon?

I did arrive back at home, well after 6 p.m., and was duly informed by Mrs. A. Hort Hound that I had ten minutes before the scheduled departure for an evening dinner engagement. On the way to dinner, she did inquire as to whether or not I had found that new suit I was looking for? I mumbled something about “nothing in my size” and drove onwards, ever thankful that I had taken that wrong left turn. I’ll take a few mums and a few new pots any day!!

I also imagined a dream day trip for the WHPS—an early departure for the Morton Arboretum with lunch, then on to the Gardener’s Palette for shopping, followed by a tour of the Cantigny Gardens. This would all be topped off by an evening wine and cheese reception at the Anderson Garden while we strolled the Upper Midwest’s finest Japanese Garden. Dream on!

—A. Hort Hound