

A Pilgrimage

Ah, but the month of May. I had stayed overnight with old friends in the charming town of Gig Harbor, on the Puget Sound just across the Tacoma Narrows, south of Seattle.

Driving into this former fishing village the evening before, I marveled at the waist-high masses of calla lilies springing up with abandon and the Chilean monkey puzzle trees dotting main street. The embankment above the car park was a solid mass of *Mitella diphylla* (how I have struggled with this plant over the years), happily ensconced in its native environs—a cool, north-facing shady bank. Though my friends had already left for work that morning, I helped myself to breakfast in the guest house that overlooked their garden. And what a charmer it was, a joint project of Paul and one of his twin daughters.

Though they had shown me plans for the gardens 7-8 years ago on a previous visit, you can imagine my amazement when this father-daughter garden was featured in *Better Homes and Gardens* earlier this year. The garden was in the English style, a rectangular plot divided into small areas by boxwood hedges, brick paths, lattice work, and arbors. It was all contained by a white picket fence, mostly hidden behind green screens of woody plant material. It was intimate and cozy, well suited to the house, which had been a Victorian sea captain's cottage in its former life. The hilltop garden borrowed the distant views of the exquisite harbor below, bobbing with pleasure craft and fishing boats. The plantings were neat and tidy and made use of architectural phormiums and *Euphorbia wulfenii*. I envied them for being able to grow many plants considered "tropicals" here in Wisconsin.

After one last trip around the garden I set out for my objective of the day, a visit to Heronswood Nursery on the west side of the Puget Sound on Bainbridge Island, almost directly across from the city of Seattle. I had picked up a map of Kitsap County for the trek, something I would advise all to do, as the nursery is reached by a series of two-lane rural roads. Driving along, I admired the massive Douglas firs, oddly enough laced with *Cornus florida* (flowering dogwood) in full bloom, from the southeast United States. After two hours of driving, which included brief halts at a couple of unheralded, wished-I-hadn't-stopped, roadside nurseries, I came upon the small wooden sign at the head of a twin driveway announcing that I had arrived at Heronswood.

Proceeding down the first drive, a ramshackle house quickly came into view, surrounded by a garden planted with old cars and rusting hulks of pick up trucks, with several old refrigerators as accents, and visually tied together with a sprinkling of old automobile tires. The only living thing was a vicious looking German shepherd who made it readily apparent that I was unwelcome. I expected to see bootleggers pouring out on the scene waving shotguns.

Slamming the car into reverse, I turned down the other driveway, which became a serene, winding woodland drive leading into Heronswood. Reaching the main area of commercial activity, I was asked if I had made an appointment, to which I replied yes, which was true. I was later to learn that making an appointment was a "formality" required by the covenants of the neighborhood forbidding any businesses with regularly scheduled hours, though I could hardly see what difference it would have made to the immediate neighbors in this case! As a matter of fact, no one was ever turned away, unless it was by that German shepherd! I was then introduced to a young gardener, who gave me brief overview of the establishment, and directed me to a master list of all the plants for sale in a dozen or so hoop houses.

I was then invited to tour the gardens on my own and to make note of the location of plants I had questions about and he would try to identify them for me later. I was also informed that all the plants were only identified by numbered labels, and under no circumstances was I to look at a label and record its number. (Apparently, they have had lots of trouble with label thieves!) If I violated this simple rule, I would be escorted back to the highway and my visit terminated. This limitation was to be pure torture, and made the visit rather unsatisfactory as many of the wonderful things I saw on my journey throughout the garden remain as "unknowns."

I elected to proceed into the garden right away as it was such a beautiful day. At the entrance, I spied a large, single white peony whose closed, ghostly orbs were back lit by the morning sun. Later, when I passed by again,

the globes had responded to the climbing sun by opening and revealing their golden crowns of stamens. My notes from the excursion say this was *Paeonia* 'steviann', but I cannot find a text reference to it and I suspect I just can't read my own handwriting. The path that led to the main house was surrounded by a magnificent woodland garden, a showcase for shade-loving plants from the Far East of many different taxa. I fell out over a small (12-15' in bloom) white thalictrum with tiny lancinate leaves—*T. lacinatum*, of course. There was a wonderful dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*) in full flower and some pink leaved forms of *Saxifrage fortunei* that I would have killed for. I did find one of my favorite anemones used in profusion, *A. nemorosa* 'vestal', with gorgeous fully double white flowers.

There were many kinds of trillium in bloom and various woodland slipper orchids. Along certain paths you were swallowed up by giant Australian tree ferns, under which were a profusion of eye catching arums, giant polygonatums and disporums, the likes of which I had never seen. Many of these are described in Dan Hinkley's **The Explorer's Garden**. I also spied the bluebell found only in the Chatham Islands in the south Pacific, *Myosotidium hortensii*, a most delectable plant. The whole thing reminded me of Savill Valley Garden in Surrey, England, with its similar rich tapestry of woodland plants.

Finally making it up to the main house, I admired an allee of *Cupressus macrocarpa* 'Goldcrest' (golden Monterey cypress) fronted by masses of *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola' that presaged a more formal part of the garden. This area consisted of many rooms divided by evergreen and woody hedges, vine covered lattice work and arbors. A back terrace area was surrounded by a 15-foot high open lattice work of hornbeam hedges (*Carpinus*). There was also a rather exotic potager (kitchen) garden that included some large specimens of gunnera and a large mushroom fountain. I was delighted to see *Astrantia* 'Hadspen Blood', whose deep red blood color resembled the specimens I had seen at Bressingham Gardens in England some years ago. Though I have purchased this several times, the color on my plants does not match these specimens. Goes to show that with the finest examples of a particular cultivar, a "clone" is the only way to duplicate it. This is certainly true of many of the fine Rodgersias, with their spumy pyramids of pink flowers that I have seen in English gardens, as well. You can just forget much of the hype about tissue culture!

Returning to the sales area, I spent the next hour or so poking through the hoop houses. I am sorry to say that even plants for sale here at the motherlode, so to speak, are no bigger than the plants you get by mail order—all in two-inch pots, which require several years of patience before the big payoff comes, if you are lucky. Also, what few plants I had been able to identify in the garden that were now on my "must have list" were unavailable—a big disappointment. I did pick up a fabulous abutilon I had admired in the gardens at Wisley on a number of visits—'Wisley Red', with its nodding, bell-shaped flowers of red and yellow. I also purchased two new forms of *Anemone nemerosa*—'Royal blue' and 'Wyatt's pink'.

I was intrigued with a new form of *Carex siderostica* 'variegata', with "reverse" variegation—the center of each leaf is white rather than the margins. However, I am sad to report that this plant loses most of its variegation by mid

summer, making it a less desirable form in my mind than the common variety, which keeps its white edges until frost. Finally, I brought back some nice plants of a fastigate boxwood—'Graham Blands'. I did pass up *Anemonopsis macrophylla* that has not done well for Shari Voss in Green County, though I was struck by the plant in flower in the woodland garden and otherwise couldn't have resisted it.

All in all, I was glad to finally see the nursery and its stunning display garden after all these years. However, I was so familiar with the garden from photographs and previous admirers' written descriptions that it was a bit of a let down. You'll know what I mean if you see yet another article on Heronswood in the RHS journal *The Garden*, in the December 2003 issue by Graham Rice.

And my reward for all of this? Certainly not a specimen of *Thalictrum lancinatum*, but rather a nightmare of a journey back to the Seattle-Tacoma airport at rush hour. Fortunately, my flight did not leave until the next morning or I might still be out there somewhere on Interstate 5!!

—by A. Hort Hound