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How Does Your Garden Age?

In order to create longevity in our landscape designs, we have to understand their aging process. This lecture will look at several examples of this aging process, in gardens both large and small, as understood by careful research and analysis. These lessons will explore the life of a garden, from birth to decline. Recent rejuvenations have sparked resurgence in understanding the aging process in these landscapes and have fueled the decisions for their rebirth - the beginning of another 100 year journey.

Most of the properties explored during this lecture are open to the public. They were used for two reasons: 1) they are easily accessible for a visit if you choose and 2) they have concise and accessible photographic documentation over several years which can better illustrate the aging process. These public spaces undergo a similar aging process to smaller, more intimate, private residential landscapes and public parks and cemeteries. I hope that the ideas expressed in this lecture can be understood and applied to landscape rejuvenation projects and new designs of all scales and types.

Findings in brief:

1. Landscapes and gardens have elements that can be broken into three categories, based on the longevity, or life span, of each element:
 - a. Foundation – those elements that will survive, even with no care, for an extended period of time (over 75 years). Materials are durable and long-lasting; or often are little changed after two generations. This category includes topography, stone walls, architectural base materials, walks and drives, iron fences, large shade trees, some orchard species, etc.
 - b. Framework – those elements that will survive for 50-75 years (1-2 generations) and require intermittent care or correction. Materials are less durable and long lasting without cyclical care. This category includes wooden fences, hedges, small trees, shrubs, hardy perennials, small architectural features, and the spatial relationships within a garden or landscape, including views and vistas, field edges, garden bed edges, etc.
 - c. Frosting – the most ephemeral elements in the garden or landscape, these elements cannot survive without regular maintenance. This category includes most herbaceous species, lawns, bousquets or manicured woodlands, etc.
2. Often, we worry extensively about the “frosting” elements, and think less about those elements that comprise the framework or foundation.
3. Materials selection is important when planning a garden for longevity – stone lasts longer than brick, gravel and base materials remain after dressed surfaces have disappeared.

4. Plant selection, including species hardiness, has a direct impact on longevity. Native species, if light and water conditions don't change dramatically, are longer lasting than tender or introduced species. Some introduced species, however, can be very durable such as varieties of peonies, hostas, helianthus, heliopsis, daylilies, Siberian iris, species shrub roses, and others. With changes in climatic conditions because of global warming, plant hardiness and plant selection choices are changing.
5. If small corrective measures are attended to early, elements in the landscape or garden can survive longer. Regular painting prevents fences from rotting. Small cracks in mortar, if corrected, can prevent wall degradation. Corrective pruning on trees and shrubs can retain their structural integrity to better withstand dramatic weather conditions.
6. Aging process can be examined through the use of old photographs, aerials and archival materials. This look backwards can inform choices for rejuvenative efforts and new garden design.
7. Typical aging process:
 - a. "Frosting" disappears, including the most ephemeral garden plants and tender or border-zone tree and shrub selections
 - b. Middle layer of the landscape grows up to obscure the spatial relationships within the garden – loss of the drama of negative spaces
 - c. "Framework" elements deteriorate
 - d. Advantageous plants and tree seedlings take root and prosper, changing light and water conditions leading to further deterioration of design through plant competition and successional growth
 - e. Deterioration of joints and mortar in walks and walls allows water penetration. Infiltration of frost action deteriorates structure of walks and walls tumble
 - f. "Framework" elements disappear.
 - g. Foundation elements remain (though they may be deteriorating) or are hidden beneath plant overgrowth
 - h. Successional plantings take advantage of adventitious light, water and soil conditions, in New England, first stage of reforestation begins
 - i. First stage of reforestation is successful. Woodland develops, matures and begins to decline
 - j. Changes in forest canopy and disruption by animals allow second stage of forest growth to begin and mature. A balanced forest ecosystem develops.
8. People and animals affect the longevity of gardens and landscapes. Actions by animals and insects (especially burrowing or feeding) can dramatically affect plant vitality and the integrity of plants, walks, drives and walls.
9. Landscape designers and gardeners are the caretakers of change. Change is inevitable and plays a constant role in the maturation of each design. Careful planning, including an understanding of change, can allow positive changes in the maturation process and provide for a more durable landscape design.
10. Craftsmanship and quality of construction has a dramatic impact on the durability of landscape elements. The better the quality of the work, the more durable the landscape.

Landscapes and Gardens explored during the lecture:

Ashintully

Sodern Road

Tyringham MA

Website: www.thetrustees.org

Castle Hill on the Crane Reservation

The Trustees of Reservations

290 Argilla Road, Ipswich MA

Website: www.thetrustees.org

Durant- Kenrick House

Historic Newton

286 Waverly Avenue, Newton MA

Website: www.historicnewton.org

The Fells

456 Route 103A Newbury, NH

Website: www.thefells.org

The Glen

3 Frank Coelho Drive

Portsmouth RI

Website: glenmanorhouse.com

Highfield Hall

56 Highfield Drive, Falmouth MA

Website: www.highfieldhall.org

Portsmouth Abbey

Cory's Lane

Portsmouth RI

Website: portsmouthabbey.org

Stevens Coolidge Place

137 Andover Street

No. Andover MA

Website: www.thetrustees.org

Others:

Private Residence, Newton MA

Private Residence, Newport RI

Star Island, Isles of Shoals