

## **Edith Wharton's Love Affair with the Berkshires**

by Honey Sharp

"The truth is that I am in love with the place - climate, scenery, life and all and when I have built a villa - and have planted my gardens and laid out paths through my bosco, I doubt if I will ever leave here."

Edith Wharton, 1900 in a letter to Ogden Codman.

If you have the good fortune to stroll through Edith Wharton's gardens on a tranquil summer day at The Mount in Lenox, Massachusetts, you may ask yourself: Am I in a European or a Berkshire garden?

Edith Wharton probably would have liked that you believe you are in both.

Continuing down the Palladian staircase from her stately terrace overlooking Laurel Lake and the Tyringham valley beyond, you would be invited to an elegant series of outdoor rooms, connected by the 'Lime Walk', a formal allée of pleached linden trees. Inhaling the distinctive aroma of dark green clipped boxwoods, you would come upon either her sunken Italianate garden or her charming parterre with a fountain as the centerpiece. "A mass of bloom", as she would triumphantly declare, it once again overflows with phlox, penstemons, petunias and snapdragons. While researching her gardens for a lecture I gave at the Mount's symposium in May entitled, "Edith Wharton and the American Garden", I have discovered that, indeed, she was an American at heart. Like a quilt, the seamless confluence of her formal gardens and the less tame landscape surrounding them, reflect an underlying tradition on this side of the Atlantic: the melting pot. While Wharton wholeheartedly embraced Continental and English landscaping styles (having lived in Europe and published "Italian Villas and their Gardens" in 1904), she was committed to the concept of a regional context.

Edith Wharton avoided designing "with preconceived ideas trying to make it like some other beautiful place to which the lay of the land bears no resemblance whatever", wrote Mrs. Daniel Chester French in her 1928 Memories of a Sculptor's Wife. Stephanie Copeland, the President of Edith Wharton Restoration, would concur with Mrs. French: "Edith advocated that Americans not replicate European gardens. Instead they should be inspired by their classical design while remaining conscious of the setting."

Wharton deeply appreciated and respected the Berkshire landscape and its cultural traditions: its villages, barns, stone walls, and dooryard gardens. Although inspired by an English country house, her home would also don typical dark green New England shutters while the romantic approach from the road would be framed by native sugar maples. Designed by her niece, Beatrix Farrand, the first woman landscape architect in America, it is an example of how they both celebrated the Berkshire woodlands and its native plants.

In 1899, at the height of the Gilded Age, Edith Wharton visited her mother-in-law in Lenox while her husband, Teddy was touring Europe. A year later, in order to escape what she called the "watering-place trivialities" of Newport, she chose to design and build a home in the "real country". The Whartons soon purchased Sargent Farm with its 113 acres in Lenox from Giorgiana Sargent, a watercolorist, and distant relative of John Singer Sargent.

With a keen interest in the Berkshires' topography: its rolling hills, streams and valleys and limestone outcroppings, Wharton carefully chose the site where the Mount would magnificently stand and where, from her writing desk she could enjoy both the view and her gardens. Her landscaping did not shy away from incorporating native flora such as white pines, hemlocks and black birches. A black birch planted in 1901 still stands today near the forecourt leading to her villa. Research, including period photographs as well as plant identification, has shown that native plants were an important element to her gardens.

For example, Wharton, an avid traveler by motorcar through the more remote hilltowns of the Berkshires, lovingly wrote of naturalistic areas including what she called "the texture" of the surrounding woodlands and "the perfume of my hemlock woods."

The period photographs also reveal majestic American elms framing her panoramic vista. In the spirit of restoration, a Princeton elm was planted a couple of years ago as a memorial to Scott Marshall, the late historian for The Mount.

As I discovered upon exploring her woods, Wharton was unambiguously drawn to wildflowers such as white Trillium, ginger plants and bloodroot as well as the prolific New England purple asters in the fall. Ferns including Christmas, Interrupted and Sensitive ferns, used in more shady areas, were also high on her list. Elderberries or *Sambucus racemosa*, in bloom with their lilac-like white flowers were another exciting find this past May.

Although research did not come up with the specific plants of her Rock Garden with its flowing grass staircase, the restoration team sought to duplicate possible plantings during her time with native clethra, cimicifuga, butterfly bush and shad. Betsy Anderson, the Mount's historian, recently explained how upon ripping out invasive plants as well as native Sumacs, they discovered cimicifuga and ostrich ferns, also native to the area.

As might be expected, Wharton not only worked closely with her architects, Codman and Hoppin and her niece, Farrand (with whom she continued to exchange plants throughout the years), she also relished in a close working relationship with her gardener: Thomas Reynolds. Unlike many in her circle, she joined the ranks of a few of the Gilded Age avid horticulturists such as George Morgan at Ventfort Hall, Daniel Chester French and later Mabel Choate at Naumkeag.

In famous a letter on July 3, 1911 to Morton Fullerton, she wrote: "Decidedly, I'm a better landscape gardener than novelist...The most

wonderful incident of my return was the finding here of my devoted and admirable head gardener ... I never saw a more moving example of devotion to one's calling. He couldn't miss the first long walk with me yesterday afternoon, the going over of every detail, the instant noting, on my part, of all he had done in my absence, the visit to every individual tree, shrub, creeper, fern, 'flower in the crannied wall' - every tiniest little bulb and root that we had planted together!"

In her all inclusive vision of her gardens at the Mount, Wharton was a major contributor to the American landscape style. Rooted not only in a confluence of distinctive approaches to landscape design and a respect for the local environment, her vision demonstrated a "pride of places". It also contributed to the Berkshire heritage from 18th century dooryard gardens to ornate and fanciful Gilded Age estates to more modest neo-colonial gardens.