

# Heaven on Earth

Who knew the finest Persian garden in the *entire* Western Hemisphere was right here in Yonkers? BY NANCY L. CLAUS



Clockwise from left: The newly restored Persian garden; 2,000-year-old marble columns; Temple of Love.



When I first walked through the gate of the Persian garden at Untermyer Park (945 N Broadway, Yonkers; [www.untermyergardens.org](http://www.untermyergardens.org)) last fall, I mentally kicked myself for not visiting here sooner. I'd driven by it dozens of times and never once took notice. It is, literally and figuratively speaking, like entering paradise—Westchester's very own Garden of Eden. Within the crenellated walls are two crisscrossing canals representing the Tigris, Euphrates, Pishon, and Gihon Rivers as described in Genesis. There's an amphitheater guarded by two sphinxes, sculpted by Paulanship, the same artist who created Rockefeller Center's *Prometheus*. Looking through the Grecian temple dedicated to Medusa (she of the snaky hair), you'll see unparalleled views of the Hudson River and the Palisades beyond. Then, as you walk along the lower terrace (where Isadora Duncan and her dancers once frolicked), a filigreed door opens to a stunning view down a steep staircase to the river, modeled after the Villa d'Este in Italy. Standing at the bottom of the steps are 2,000-year-old cipollino marble columns imported from

Rome by Stanford White. All this—right here in Yonkers, people. For the love of God, make a visit to Untermyer Park number one on your to-do list!

It's called America's greatest forgotten garden. Designed in 1915 by Beaux-Arts architect William Welles Bosworth (who also designed another local masterpiece for the Rockefellers at Kykuit), it originally consisted of 150 acres. Samuel Untermyer, a fabulously wealthy corporate lawyer and leader of the anti-Nazi movement, was so proud of his estate that he shared it with the public. On a single day in 1939, as many as 30,000 people came to ooh

PHOTOS BY JONATHAN WALLEN

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and *aah* at the gardens, take in the panoramic views, and stroll along the woodland trail to the fancifully named Temple of Love.

But after Untermyer died in 1940, the gardens began to fall into disrepair. He had intended for his estate to become a public park, but neither the state nor the county was able to afford it. (It took 60 gardeners and 60 greenhouses to maintain it in its heyday.) The City of Yonkers acquired part of the garden in 1946; another parcel was added in the 1990s, bringing the total today to around 43 acres. Time took its toll, weeds took over, mosaics crumbled, and much of the gardens lay in ruins.

Enter Architect Stephen Byrns, former commissioner of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. "I first visited the garden in the 1990s, when I was living in Yonkers," he says. "It was bone-dry and the plantings were modest, but, intuitively, I thought this was something very special, just in bad condition. Then, in 2010, a friend told me I should revisit the gardens. This time the water was on, the fountains were bubbling, and it was an overwhelming sensory experience, like falling in love. Even though the plantings were still modest, it was clear that some work had been done and that was very encouraging to me."

Working in partnership with the Yonkers Parks Department, Byrns helped found the Untermyer Gardens Conservancy, a nonprofit dedicated to its restoration. Horticulturist Timothy Tilghman has been working full-time toward that goal since June 2011. Marco Polo Stufano, founding director of horticulture at Wave Hill, another noted garden just over the border in the Bronx, is an advisor for the project.

With the exception of the massive weeping beeches (representing the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil) and some shrubs, everything is newly planted—hydrangeas, roses, butterfly bushes, and other perennials—with the goal of recreating the garden as it was in the 1930s. This spring, 25,000 tulips will bloom, the first mass planting in 40 years. By the end of summer, the lower terrace will be fully planted. Work to restore the Temple of Love will begin in the fall.

The conservancy has its work cut out for it as there is still plenty of work left to be done: One of the wall's four towers has collapsed, the swimming pool with mosaicked sea creatures is a work in progress (Byrns thinks it will take \$1 million to complete it), and the rock gardens could use some love. The ruins of a carriage house (where David Berkowitz, aka the Son of Sam, was rumored to have performed satanic rituals) will remain untouched. "I like it as it is," Byrns explains. "As you walk down the steps past the ancient columns and look down at the ruined gatehouse, it shows the passage of time. And that is what a garden should do." 



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