

A garden for the people: Landcraft foundation opens public oasis in Mattituck



Dennis Schrader and Bill Smith talk to Newsday about the transformation of their 14-acre private garden into a public oasis that will be run by the foundation they created. Credit: Randee Daddona

By Jessica Damiano Special to Newsday Updated April 30, 2021 11:17 AM
PRINT SHARE

When Dennis Schrader steps out his front door, he said, he enjoys gazing at the two majestic oaks he and his husband, Bill Smith, planted nearly 30 years ago. Off to the right, a large lawn is surrounded by perennial borders

abundantly planted with white bearded irises, roses and grasses — and punctuated by a pond that looks like it has been there forever.

In 1992, when the couple first moved to the 1840s farmhouse they bought on leased land in Mattituck, in the heart of the North Fork wine region, one of the first things they did was plant those irises, which had traveled with them from their former garden in Baldwin. The plants' ancestors had been in Smith's family for years. Joining the irises in the garden's rich soil is a 120-year-old pussy willow, which had belonged to Schrader's grandfather and has moved over the years from Brooklyn to Baldwin and Huntington before settling in to its new scenic home, nestled between the Long Island Sound, Mattituck Creek and the Peconic Bay.

"At the time, we thought that would be the size of the entire garden," Schrader said of the 1-acre plot, designed by Smith, that surrounds their home. But as the years went by, the couple bought adjacent lots, including an overgrown, abandoned farm covered in poison ivy, invasive plants and roses. And with each purchase, their garden grew — one acre at a time.

"After clearing the farm's green space," Schrader recalled, "we moved into each area, putting in a pond, then a stream and a meadow and a woodland," all the while running Landcraft Environments, a wholesale tropical plants nursery, from the property.

"We had all these great plants we were collecting, so we had to keep making the garden bigger," said Schrader, who, along with Smith, has a horticulture and design background. Before long, their commercial greenhouses were surrounded by 4 acres of beautiful gardens, and word got out. "In a typical year, we would have 2,000 to 3,000 visitors from garden clubs, societies and schools," Schrader said. "We did no publicity at all. It was just word-of-mouth."





Clockwise from above: Dennis Schrader, left, and his partner, Bill Smith, created Landcraft Garden Foundation in Mattituck as a means to share the "refuge" they have created. The seasonal garden display, with wisteria in full bloom on the arbor, foxglove, willow branches, Spanish lavender and more, teems with color. Rhododendrons offer a burst of color in April. | Photos by Randee Daddona

Joy in sharing

Schrader and Smith found they enjoyed sharing the beauty of their garden so they joined The Garden Conservancy's Open Days program, opening their property for public tours one day a year during which "a couple hundred" people typically would stroll the garden in search of inspiration, Schrader said. "Gradually, we started thinking about [making the garden more accessible to the public], and about three years ago began exploring what we needed to do."

Setting up their nonprofit, Landcraft Garden Foundation, took two years; then there was the process of assembling a board of directors and an advisory board, which includes such gardening luminaries as Martha Stewart, award-winning British horticulturist Fergus Garrett and Dan Hinkley, author and co-founder of Heronswood Nursery in Washington, among others. And then the

COVID-19 pandemic hit, postponing Landcraft's planned spring 2020 opening by a year.

Today, the foundation, with Schrader and Smith as president and vice president, respectively, is dedicated to the preservation of Landcraft Gardens. The couple will retain lifetime tenancy of their home and property, which will gradually pass to the foundation through their estate so that the public can enjoy the grounds' sweeping vistas and extraordinary gardens forever. Currently, five caretakers work at Landcraft, tasked with planting and maintaining the gardens on a daily basis.

"We are really all very lucky with what they are giving to the community," said Lucy Cutler, former director of philanthropy for The Nature Conservancy and New York Botanical Garden and a trustee of the Landcraft Garden Foundation. "As far as I know, there isn't another garden of this stature, design, diversity that's open to the public [on Long Island]," she said, adding, "I feel like I'm transported when I go there. I could be in an English garden or a tropical oasis or on the North Fork with the native plants. There really is something for every visitor."

Long Island hasn't seen a new public garden open since 2008, when the secluded 5-acre Bridge Gardens opened in Bridgehampton. So the conversion of Schrader's and Smith's personal garden into a public garden is regionally significant. With something for everyone, from homeowners seeking inspiration for their own gardens to day-trippers and families wanting to bask in nature, Landcraft Garden Foundation is "a real jaw-droppingly beautiful gift to the community," Cutler said.

"Our main goal is for the garden to live beyond us," Schrader said, "and we just really want to see it prosper and see horticulture and gardening prosper in the future and let others enjoy the gardens, too."





Clockwise from above: An eye-catching entry pavilion and overhead structure, which have been treated in the Japanese technique of *shou sugi ban*, greet visitors. The knot, with a Haddonstone urn planted with rosemary and spring flowers and woven shrubbery of yellow, green, burgundy and red, is located close to the residence. A Japanese iris grows in the "meadow." | Photos by Randee Daddona (pavilion and urn); Dennis Schrader (iris)

Creating a 'refuge'

At the end of the newly constructed long gravel driveway off Grand Avenue, visitors come face-to-face with an eye-catching entrance pavilion and overhead structure, both of which have been treated in the Japanese technique of *shou sugi ban*, in which wood is burned until charred, then protected with natural oil. Inside, a gift and garden shop will open to a pollinator path, which in turn leads to the rondels — three circular supports made from locust wood harvested from the property upon which climbing roses and exotic vines grow.

Next comes Schrader's favorite — the ruin — a subterranean stone grotto he built from collected architectural salvage. And at the back of the property, a linden allee offers a shady path for a stroll. "Allee" is the French word for "alley," which is derived from the Latin "venire," which means "to come." The

planting style is distinguished by two rows (sometimes, double rows) of identical trees flanking a path that beckons visitors "to come" to the other end.

The meadow garden is a feast for the senses, its fluffy, swaying grasses interplanted with perennials to create a spectacular vision of color and texture. Closer to the residence, the knot garden weaves shrubbery of yellow, green, burgundy and red in a knotted-rope pattern, and window boxes and hundreds of containers on the porch and around the house hold unusual tropicals, ferns and perennials that change with the seasons.

Visitors can meander through winding paths that pass a large grove of *Musa basjoo* — the hardy banana with 6-foot leaves — and explore other tropical and subtropical plants along the way. There is a tiki hut, too, that will be filled with a collection of exotic plants, and there are plans to build a labyrinth later this year.

Four of the property's 14 acres have been designed into garden spaces. The remaining 10 acres encircling them are "wild native plant gardens with mowed walking trails through them" and serve as a habitat for birds, insects and such wildlife as box turtles, rabbits, foxes and woodchucks, Schrader said.

Landcraft Garden also plans to offer yoga classes and workshops for adults and children on topics ranging from canning food to painting.

From a private garden that "started out simply to have something beautiful" for themselves, Schrader said he and Smith wanted "to create a little refuge [for people] to get away from it all and a laboratory for learning." The sentiment is echoed in the Landcraft Garden Foundation's mission statement: "Ultimately our intention is to provide the experience of joy that gardens bring to people throughout the world."

"The garden lifts your spirits. It feeds your mind. It calms your soul," said Cutler, the trustee. "This garden opening now is the perfect place to go as we come out of this COVID hibernation. It's like a vaccine to the soul."





Clockwise from above: Lucy Cutler, a trustee of the Landcraft Garden Foundation in Mattituck, sits on the rooftop garden of the "ruin." Perennials guide the path at the linden allee, under-planted with hellebores followed by daffodils and then allium. Succulents grow in the wholesale nursery. | Photos by Randee Daddona

IF YOU GO

Landcraft Garden Foundation will hold its "soft opening" on May 7 and operate from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays through October. Tickets for two-hour timed entry slots must be purchased in advance online at landcraftgardenfoundation.org (go to the drop-down menu for "Visit," then click on "General Info"). Admission is \$15 for adults; \$12 for students and seniors; \$5 for children under 12; free for children under 2; and free for members.





Clockwise from above: The pollinator path, which begins just beyond the entry pavilion, has a view of the rondels. A closer look at the rondels, created from locust wood harvested on the property, with wooden chairs handmade by Dennis Schrader. A weeping Katsura tree sits between the pollinator path and the meadow, flanked by Mexican feather grass, Verbascum and salvia. | Photos by Randee Daddona (pollinator path and rondels); Dennis Schrader (weeping Katsura)

Landcraft workshops

In keeping with Dennis Schrader's and Bill Smith's desire to create a "laboratory for learning," Landcraft Garden Foundation will offer adult and children's workshops throughout the season.

Check landcraftgardenfoundation.org for registration information (additional fees apply). These workshops are planned for 2021:

For adults

Botanical drawing

Food preservation

Yoga/guided meditation

Meadow walk

Beekeeping

Succulent pizzas

Repotting/mounting orchids

Hypertufa planters

Topiaries

Plant propagation

For children

Introduction to gardening

Introduction to meadows and the natural environment

Scavenger hunt (plant ID)

Storytime (garden subjects)

Fairy tea party

Build your own nest

Vegetable gardening



A Garden Conservancy
"Open Days" sign at Landcraft Garden Foundation in Mattituck. | Randee Daddona
Credit: Randee Daddona