

How Does Your Garden Grow?

The Friends of Colvin Run Mill have engaged a landscape architect to “revive” the garden on the south side of the miller’s house. Positioned on a small ridge overlooking the mill and Colvin Run Road, the space is absolutely delightful but the surroundings are not. Barren garden beds graced with dirt and mulch occupy half the circumference, upkept boxwoods and azaleas, a thick cluster of non-blooming daffodils, a heavy bed of silt grass, and phalanxes of non-native invasive plants have rendered the spot more than a bit ragged.



Naively, I thought reviving the garden would be a rather straightforward affair. Secure a few quotes and ideas and may the best bid win. After many months we did end up with an excellent proposal, but the road was long and windy.

Colvin Run Mill Park rightly prides itself on its historical integrity. The moment you walk onto the grounds you sense passing through a time warp. The revived garden should be true to the “period of relevance, “ as the experts say. For us, this period was around 1890, as it is for one of the newly renovated rooms in the house now open to the public. As we learn about lives inside the house, we could also appreciate more about their lives outside when not toiling at the mill, barn, pastures, and vegetable patch.

A very hefty, “Cultural Landscape Report” was the logical source for guidance. Well-documented with pictures, an elegant phrase describes the “two garden terraces defined by stone walls that cascade down the slope toward the mill.” Indeed, the south garden has dry stone wall on its eastside that serves to level the ground adjacent to the house, and another stone wall bisects the garden to transpose a slope to a sharp drop navigated by two stone stairs on either side. Unfortunately,



the twelve year old “Report” seems to have been written by a committee as evidenced by contradictions on important points. For example, the reader is advised that the date of the installation of the walls is unknown. Another passage declares that a dry stack wall existed when the FCPA assumed control in 1965. To the complete contrary, a third section speculates that the walls may have been built in the 1980’s!

Descriptions of vegetation fare no better. At one point the “Report” notes that ornamental species in the garden may have been planted by the Millard family who lived in the house from 1883 to 1934. But in another section it remarks that after the Park Authority took over, “a number of campaigns of ornamental plantings” resulted in a more “gardenesque character”

than there would have been during the period of relevance, “this being more of a working than ornamental landscape.” The author concedes that perhaps daffodil, daylily and iris bulbs may have been planted by the Millard’s, but the boxwoods, azaleas and other shrubs definitely not, although, as an afterthought, perhaps the Katsura tree was.

“Working rather than ornamental landscape?” Really. Could the author not have envisaged the owners having a garden to enjoy for its sheer beauty and tranquility? We understand that the Millard family worked hard but also enjoyed leisure time playing musical instruments, swimming, ice skating, and playing baseball. Why not gardening?

Andrew Jackson Downing, considered the “Father of American Landscaping,” wrote his first treatise on the subject in 1841. Aimed at the growing middle class, Downing preached the need for coherent design, native plants, and elevating nature around one’s home. “Whatever leads man to assemble the comforts and elegancies of life around his habitation, tends to increase local attachments and render domestic life more delightful...there is no employment or recreation which affords the mind greater or more permanent satisfaction than that of cultivating the earth and adorning our property.”

During the Millard’s family stay at Colvin Run the Burpee Seed Company already was mailing seeds across the country. The first Ladies Garden Club was founded (1891 Athens, Georgia), as was the Garden Club of America (1913), and the American Horticultural Society (1922). Interest in plants grew and gardens blossomed. It is not unreasonable to assume that Millard’s partook in this budding passion of the middle class?

Of all garden styles, the plot is perfectly suited for an informal garden. No geometric shapes, and some hardscaping to add structure and interest. Trees and shrubs provide a vertical dimension. The plantings will be native, as much as possible, attract



pollinators, be deer proof (herds still feed regularly at the park), be shade tolerant, and thrive on a minimum of moisture. Plants that have fit that bill include: Virginia Sweet spire, fringed bleeding heart, wintergreen, Christmas Fern, Mountain laurel, blue-eyed grass, Oakleaf hydrangea, golden star, creeping sedge,



southern bayberry, goat’s beard, Jim Dandy, American beautyberry, lowbush blueberry, bottlebrush buckeye, Solomon’s seal, black chokeberry, summer sweet, Canadian wild ginger, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, Virginia Bluebells, mayapple, bloodroot, Easter columbine, great lobelia, Blue False Indigo.



Preparation will begin this summer with planting in the fall. The total cost will be about \$15,000 which includes an annual maintenance contract. We will apply for a grant to cover half the cost. Not inexpensive, but then we want Colvin Run to attract not only pollinators but people. The “revived” garden will be a delightful spot for a picnic, for reading, or just reflecting. If you are so inclined, you can designate a [donation](#) to the Friends of Colvin Run Mill for the “garden fund.” Then next spring we all will see how does **our** garden grow.

