



# Healing beauty

by Jeannette Ross

Some people talk to their plants, but Mary Larkin communes with hers. As the gardener in charge of a 12-acre private estate in Katonah, N.Y., Mary has ample opportunity to contemplate the formal and informal beds and plantings that run the gamut from stand-up-and-salute formality to frog-inspired whimsy. It is a place of beauty, yes, but also a place that promotes inner healing and well-being.

Visitors may see for themselves when the garden opens on Sunday, July 22, from 10 to 4, rain or shine, as part of the Garden Conservancy Open Days program. This is the third year the garden will be part of the program, although Mary has been participating as a visitor herself since 1995.

"Public gardens are not lived in, and they don't help me fix my house and my problems," Mary said, when asked why she was such an Open Days booster. She continues to visit other gardens, Stonecrop in Cold Spring, N.Y., being one of her favorites. "If I stay inbred in my own head, I'm not getting any oxygen," she said.

In her communion with her plants, Mary is very much aware of the history of the property where she works. The

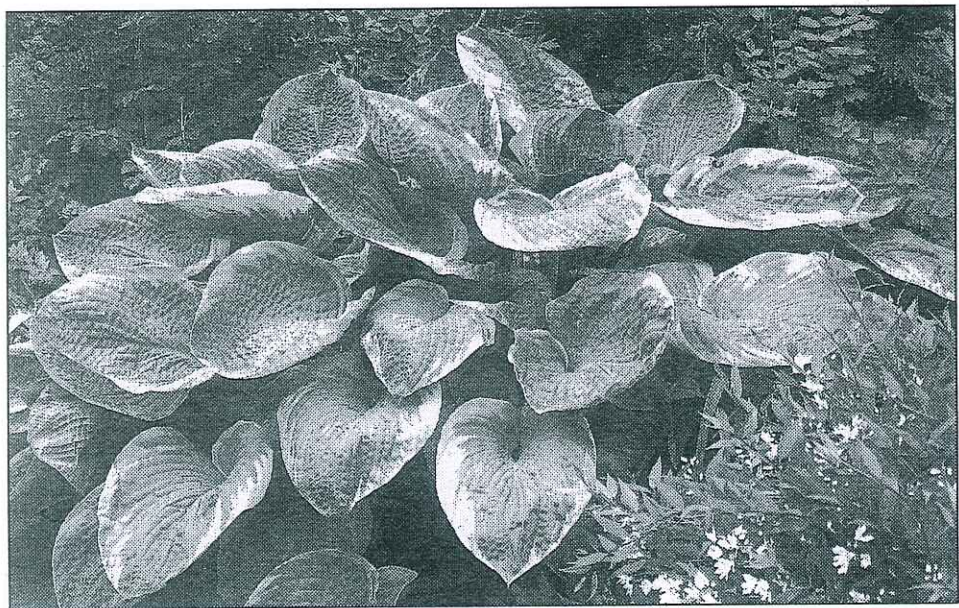
A 12-acre estate, once part of a farm owned by the Van Cortlandt family, runs the gamut from stand-up-and-salute formality to frog-inspired whimsy. The garden will be open to the public on July 22 from 10 to 4.





original part of the main house dates to the 1740s, having been part of a farm owned by the Van Cortlandt family. "Reyburn Road is an old Indian trail," Mary explained, leading to a river that is now a reservoir. An Indian burial ground lies in the distance, she said. When the Army Corps of Engineers built the reservoir in the late 1800s, they added on to the farmhouse, using it as a barracks. That wing remains. (A modern wing flanks the opposite side of the original house.)

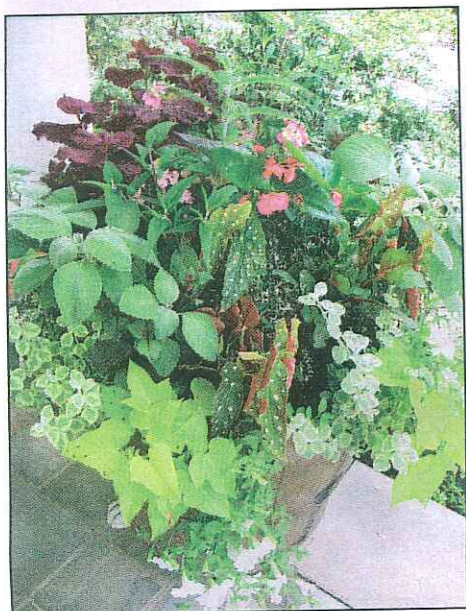
Eight trees remain from an historic apple orchard. They are not originals – although they are about 100 years old – but are descendants of the originals. A recent storm amputated one side of a tree that had a forked trunk, but the tree is still alive and Mary said it will stay. "She's still beautiful." Mary walked over to another apple tree, practically hollowed out from age and held together with a series of cables. "We've been waiting for her to go, but she keeps on going, so I'm going to plant her," Mary said, explaining



A pleasing mix of foliage and color is a highlight of this Katonah garden.

Frost euphorbia with its tiny white flowers. A begonia is not just any begonia. It's an angel-winged begonia with polka-dotted leaves. Here and there are salvia. "I ordered 12 varieties of salvia this year," Mary said. "It's very airy looking – in royal blue and light blue – those are the kinds of annuals I like. Things that are soothing and healing."

Considering her work – she gets considerable help from a small staff – Mary explained why the garden is open in the middle of July. "It's about the bragging rights," she said. "Everyone can look good in May and June." It's the garden that can stand up to mid-summer heat and alternating storms and drought that deserves recognition.



The choice of plants and their containers offer inspiration.

While the buildings are off-limits, all the grounds will be accessible during the Open Day, including the herb garden and the vegetable garden. The herb garden is a small plot near the house, enclosed by a tiny white picket fence. While Mary has the house chef in mind when she plants the herb garden, she also has someone else in mind. "There was a woman cooking here many years ago, and she's still here."

Down past the 100-year-old clay tennis court and the swimming pool is perhaps Mary's favorite spot, the new vegetable garden. It is in its first year, and so is still in formation, but those healing properties are very much evident. "In the late afternoon I come down here and I'm by myself," Mary said. "All the noise is done, and there's a pileated woodpecker that comes by. The wild turkeys come in and peck. The deer come down the road, and I sit here and we watch it change from day to night."

Mary wasn't always a gardener. She spent many years in the corporate rat race, eventually leaving to work with her husband in his construction company. Serendipity put her in the right place at the right time to take over the resuscitation of

she would put plants in the hollow spots and dedicate the tree to a friend suffering from cancer.

After talking to Mary for a while, you realize she refers to all her plants as "she." "They're all my children," she explained. "I weave characters into what I do." The garden, she said, is intended to be as healing as it is beautiful. Sometimes, however, bad things happen, as when a storm cut down a number of very large, very old evergreens. "I had to grieve for them," Mary said, before she was able to move on in that area.

Mary has no formal horticultural training; she is strictly self-taught. The homeowner, who uses the property for entertaining, is not horticulturally inclined, but is particular about how his landscape should look. In other words, really good.

"At the beginning of the season he says, 'Wow me,'" Mary said. It's a task that gives her a lot of freedom but also a lot of responsibility. The owner likes things neat and crisp – nothing hairy, floppy, or blowsy – and as a result, there is a lot of formality. The focal point is a gazebo flanked by two perennial beds that are a testament to perennials. They contain no annuals. Anchoring the beds are boxwoods, spirea, and PeeGee hydrangeas. Playing supporting but very visible roles are hosta, sedum, wild geranium, phlox, and astilbe, among others. The result is a pleasing mix of foliage and color that elicits what Mary feels is the natural human response to a garden, that of "going 'ooh,' touching and smelling."

The other must-see on this tour are the many container plantings, as interesting for the plant materials as for the vessels themselves, many of which are very old and very ornate. Down by the guest house are several urns dominated by magnificent banana plants, mixed with begonias, dichondra and even a type of sweet potato with arresting heart-shaped leaves. Other containers feature this year's "hot, hot, hot" plant, Diamond

these gardens eight years ago. In reflecting on her career change, Mary talked about her grandmother, who told her that women of her age were content because "we knew what our role was."

So does Mary. "At the end of the day I know what my job is," she said.

Part of that job will be welcoming visitors on July 22. She welcomes questions and comments. Admission is \$5, which supports The Garden Conservancy. The garden is at 33 Reyburn Road in Katonah. Take Route 35 west into Katonah. Cross I-684, and at the second traffic light turn left onto Cherry Street. The first right is Reyburn Road. Bear left at the fork. The house is on the right with a white picket fence. Parking is on the street.

For information, call 888-842-2442 or visit online at [opendaysprogram.org](http://opendaysprogram.org). ■