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Four-acre garden honors spirit of Washington and Mason

Entering through the gate at 1776 Hwy. in the Town of Grafton is like stepping into a gracious Virginia plantation similar to George Washington's Mount Vernon or colonial statesman George Mason's Guntsun Hall.

Two Oaks, owned by Bryon Gore, is one of five properties on the Port Washington Garden Club's garden walk Saturday, July 14, and one nobody should miss.

Gore plans to give three talks during the tour, which runs from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

At 9:30 a.m., he will give an arboretum tour of the mature trees, including birch, lindens, evergreens and beech. At 11:30 a.m., he will lead a garden design tour, explaining what goes into creating an 18th century estate garden. The basics, he said, hold true for a city garden.

At 1:30 p.m., Gore will conduct a "Meet the Gardenmaker" session when people can ask questions and see the gardens through his eyes.

They are the eyes of a philosopher and artist who is as likely to talk about the dance created by the dragonflies that visit his garden as he is to explain why he chose lemon trees for one of the gardens.

The immensity of the garden — about four acres of the 13-acre property — is almost overwhelming, yet there are private and public places that provide intimate spaces for reflection as well as grandiose views of the expansive grounds.

The most awe-inspiring vista is from the formal lookout point behind the main house that offers a view of a goldfish pond filled with lily pads, the enormous informal European circular garden bordered with pale yellow chrysanthemums and white snapdragons, a large pond with a water fountain and, across the expanse at eye level, a statue in the center of four columns — the contemplative gardener looking back on his creation.

One of Gore's favorite views is from that perspective, looking back on what he has created over the past 30 years. Another favorite spot is the woodland garden with a meandering path.

"All of the vistas are planned — these little vignettes that you come upon," Gore said

Gore, who designs and builds houses and gardens, is an avid historian who is intrigued by Mason, who was a gardener and political thinker who envisioned a new form of government for the people and of the people. During the midst of the 1976 sesquicentennial of the nation's birth, Gore decided he wanted a colonial estate of that era and began looking for the right spot.

He asked the late Gerald Gruen, a Port Washington real estate developer, to look for places along Lake Michigan. Gore ended up buying farmland from Gruen's wife Shirley Gruen and sister-in-law Marie Schanen in 1981.

"I told him what I planned to do and he thought it was way too ambitious," Gore said. "He thought it was next to impossible that somebody could do what I planned to do out of a farm field. Gerry would stop in and say, 'Son, you did what you said you would do.'"

Gore didn't plan to have such elaborate gardens when he built the three houses on the estate — one for him and his family, one for his parents and one for his office. The main house is a replica of Gunston Hall.

"I wasn't satisfied with each (garden) room I was creating, and one thing led to another," Gore said. "I decided to do a more European-style garden. I also love French and Italian gardens."

The front lawn of his estate is similar to those created during colonial times, Gore said, with tall trees, a formal, sedate approach and areas for livestock, in his case large Scottish sheep similar to those that roamed Mount Vernon and chickens. The chicken coop resembles the house behind it — cream-colored wood with burgundy colored shutters, doors and ramps.

A circle garden features boxwood shrubs cut in spiral and stepped-back shapes, beech trees, white begonias and a fountain in the center.

There are four gates to the garden — one leading to an obelisk at the end of a long, wide path bordered with tall trees. Behind the obelisk is a cemetery where Gore's parents and grandmother are buried.

The other gates lead to a woodland garden, the main house and a large informal garden with statues.

"It's designed for contemplation, a spiritual room," Gore said of the circle garden.

The majority of flowers throughout the estate are white, including tall vintage rose bushes. There are accents of yellow, blue and pale pink. One walkway is lined with lemon-yellow daylilies and in a garden lemon trees are lush with fruit. There are bluebells and forget-me-nots in the woodland garden.

White against green is dramatic during the day, but even more so at night.

"The garden at night comes alive. In the moonlight, it's absolutely spellbinding," Gore said.

“Having the green and white gives an interesting perspective.”

The white flowers remind him of white clouds in the sky, producing changing views. Similarly, sheep grazing and chickens scratching in the dirt are part of the garden’s picture.

“Those are the nuances that are part of the dance — the sights, scents and sounds of the garden,” Gore said.

Watching people enjoy his garden brings a special pleasure, he said, similar to one experienced by a chef who prepares a special meal or an artist who creates a painting.

The impact on the viewer is as much a part of the art as the work itself, he noted.

The butterflies, birds, dragonflies, frogs and other creatures found in the garden are also part of the dance, lured there by the berries and pollen-laden plants Gore chose.

“I’m so fortunate to have so many (wildlife) visitors,” Gore said. “You hope to accomplish that by creating a garden of invitation.”