“Open to All Real Plant Lovers”: Book Review

Judith Siporin


Beatrix Farrand’s Reef Point Gardens in Bar Harbor, Maine, were dismantled and her house torn down about forty years ago. The granite gate pillars and giant sentinel spruces that marked the entrance remain on the site, as does the gardener’s cottage beyond them, but the flowerbeds and the paths with their strategically placed benches are gone. Only the magnificent views of the Maine coast are unchanged. Farrand accepted the transitory nature of human creations with courage and a total lack of sentimentality: it was she herself who, fearing an uncertain future for the property when she was no longer there to look after it, put an end to her much loved gardens and house. But with the re-publication in one volume of *The Bulletins of Reef Point Gardens,* written by Farrand in the conviction that “words and illustrations outlive many plantations,” we can recover a vivid sense of what the garden once was.

The bulletins, seventeen in all, published between 1946 and 1956, were distributed worldwide and could be purchased by visitors to the gardens for ten cents each. Written for the most part by Farrand with help from four staff members who worked closely with her in the gardens, they share a clear, concise prose style grounded in detailed observation of plants and knowledge of their cultivation. They also express devotion to a mission, to creating “a place in the world where those who are moved by outdoor art may study or enjoy books, gardens, birds, and the beauty of sky, sea, colour, and the changing seasons—ever different and yet eternal.” The new compilation, a project of the Island Foundation of Bar Harbor, presents the bulletins in chronologically arranged facsimile with an informative introduction by Paula Deitz.

Farrand’s ambition at Reef Point was to adapt her parents’ picturesque garden and summer house, built at the end of the nineteenth century in the newly fashionable summer community of Bar Harbor, for use as a self-sustaining institution for the study of horticulture and landscape design.

Throughout her career, commissions (including the White House gardens during Woodrow Wilson’s administration, the Yale and Princeton campuses, and Dumbarton Oaks) took her away from Maine, but in 1939 the Farrands formally established the Reef Point Gardens Corporation, and her energies became increasingly focused on this personal project. Although her hopes for building an ongoing institution were never fulfilled, her creation became in its day the only public botanic garden in Maine and was said to contain “the finest collection of plants north of the Arnold Arboretum.”

Indeed, Farrand owed her own early education in horticulture to the private tutoring of Professor Charles S. Sargent at the Arnold Arboretum. He also encouraged her to enter the field of landscape design, which at that time ordinarily would have been denied to her as a woman, and he recommended her for her first commission. The Arboretum nourished a scientific and scholarly interest in plant collections, which in many respects determined the character of her own garden. Not only were a number of the unusual plants she grew at Reef Point propagated at the Arboretum, but in return she sent to its propagators cuttings from rare plants she had herself collected. She aimed to establish the proper classification and nomenclature, worthy of the best botanic gardens, and to accomplish this relied heavily on the advice of Arboretum staff, who identified more than eighty of her specimens from flowers.
The bulletins define the long-range plans drawn up by Farrand and her husband (a scholar and professor of history) and describe the steps she took toward establishing an institution that could serve a far-reaching community. Some of them focus on specific aspects of Reef Point Gardens: the site and its ancient geological history; the buildings and their redesign to accommodate public visitors; the plan of the grounds, a walking tour; the library with its impressive collection of more than 2,700 volumes, documents, and archival material; the herbarium with over 1,800 pressed and dried specimens collected from the grounds; and the print collection. Some bulletins are devoted to special groups of plants in the garden and their cultivation and maintenance: conifers, single roses, the climbing plants that created what Farrand
termed “vertical beds,” heaths and heathers, and native Maine woodland plants. They also include contemporary black-and-white photographs of the grounds and of the house and its interior; detailed plans of the gardens, paths, and roads; plant lists with comments on particular species; and a list of blooming plants month by month. The appendix provides miscellaneous additional material, such as a list of “treasured seeds still intact in envelopes” that Farrand collected from around the world.

The aesthetic aspect of Reef Point Gardens was often closely allied with a scientific one, apparent in the emphasis on exact order and classification, the organization of coherent collections of plants, and the inclusion of natural habitats and their plants. Farrand loved the simplicity and purity of single roses, which she likened to illuminations in a medieval book of hours or to the drawings from nature of Dürer or Leonardo. Nurserymen had told her that these beautiful roses were so far out of fashion that they no longer listed them in catalogs. Farrand’s collection was said to be “the most complete group of single hybrid tea roses in this country and abroad”; several varieties were to be found only at Reef Point, having been “almost lost to cultivation.” Such a collection could serve as a counterpoise to the dictates of fashion and preserve varieties for posterity.

Farrand makes clear in the bulletins that Reef Point Gardens were made for the serious student of nature and gardens rather than for the casual tourist. She nonetheless took pains to preserve the welcoming character of the house, with its comfortable library and the thirty-foot terrace where visitors could “spend a long afternoon with books and enjoy the quiet harbour view.” She offered her garden to the general public “in the hope they will glean some of the pleasure it has given the first owners for over fifty years.” Beyond her own property, she left her mark on the wider community by designing over fifty gardens in Bar Harbor, including that of the Rockefellers, and donated a great deal of her time to the planning of Acadia Park, consulting extensively with John D. Rockefeller, Jr., about the plantings to be used along the carriage roads.

In the last bulletin, written three years before her death and intended for use as her obituary, Farrand was at pains to place her accomplishments in the context of her collaborations and other strong alliances. It was especially fitting, then, that when Farrand declared her intention to destroy the gardens, friends found a way to perpetuate her exceptional collection of plants. Charles Savage, the owner of a local inn and a member of the Reef Point Gardens Corporation, designed two gardens in Northeast Harbor to which many of Farrand’s plants were moved—“a remarkable feat of plant preservation,” according to the introduction. One of these is an azalea garden modeled after a Japanese “stroll garden” with a pool that reflects the carefully composed sequence of colors of the azaleas; proceeds from the sale of The Bulletins of Reef Point Gardens will go to an endowment for this garden. Now called the Asticou Azalea Garden, it is, in the words of the sign that marked the entrance to Reef Point, “open to all real plant lovers.”

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