

Ordering and Terracing in the Leventritt Garden

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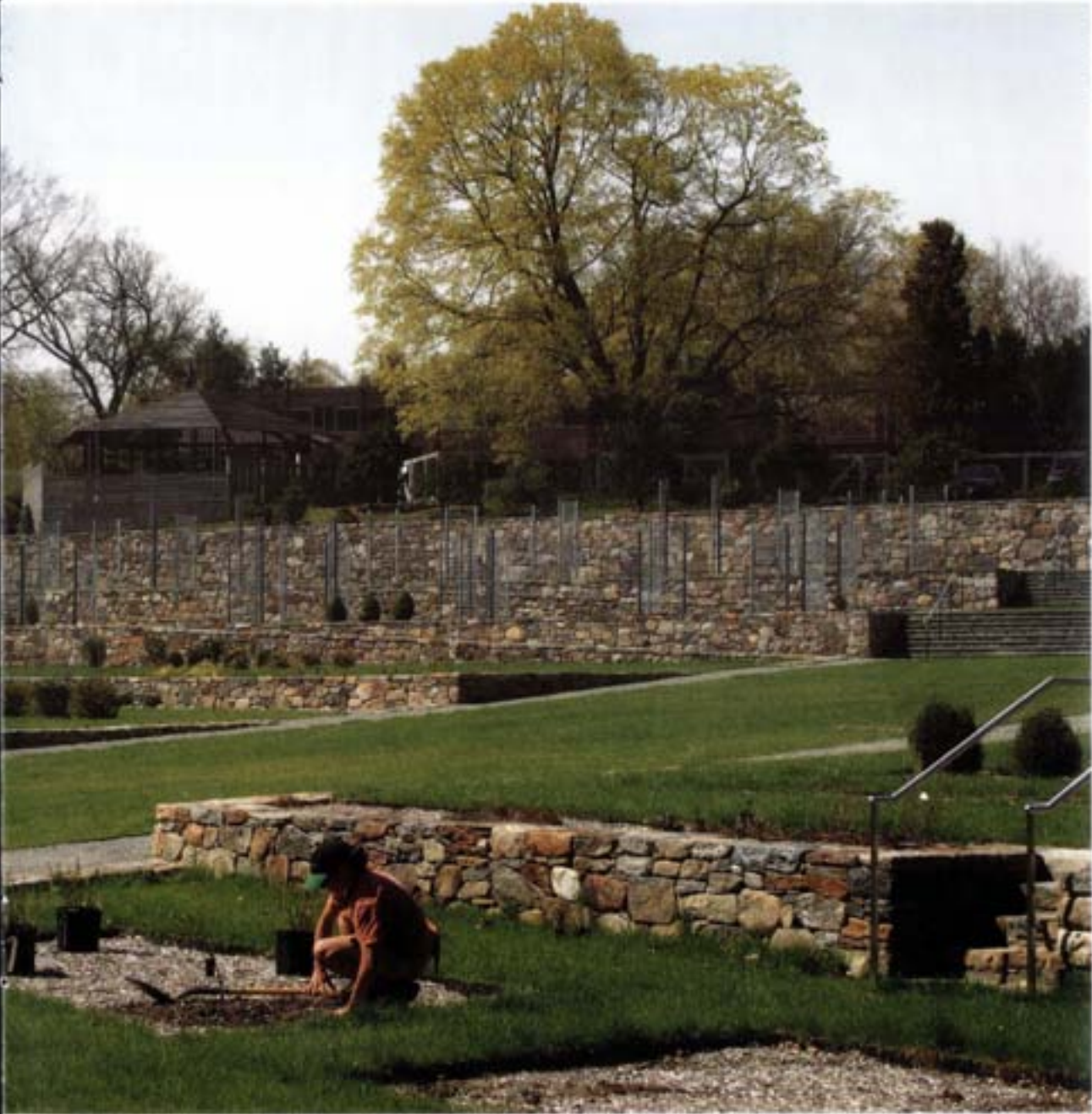
We think of gardens as one of our fundamental means of cultural expression: they embody particular ideas of use, or cultivation, commemoration, or other aspects of human enterprise. The Arnold Arboretum's new M. Victor and Frances Leventritt Garden for sun-loving shrubs and vines, as an enclosed garden—a *hortus conclusus*—within the larger Arnold Arboretum landscape, gives expression to an essential question of botanical and horticultural purpose: How should plants be arranged for study and display?

The garden's layout pursues the question with directness in two ways. First, the land, a fan-shaped parcel that slopes more than thirty feet, has been reshaped into level terraces of varying width to fit the site's irregular outline. This reshaping is rooted in the ancient practice of leveling ground for cultivation where the land is not naturally flat. Second, plants are arranged in rows or within geometric groups, a familiar method stemming from the most basic of horticultural traditions. Geometry aids in our work with nature.

Anyone who has grown their own lettuce or apples or corn knows the importance of this practice: for planting, for harvesting, for pruning and irrigating, some system of order is required; planting in rows on level ground makes sense. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when emerging medical faculties in European universities began to build knowledge in plant culture and taxonomy, they organized "physic gardens"—at St. Galls, Oxford, Leiden, Padua—in rectilinear or curving rows, with an eye to the aggregate pattern as an artful exercise in order. The Italians, who possessed almost no flat land,

Bethany Grasso, shrub and vine gardener, planting the Leventritt Garden. The lath house of the Larz Anderson Bonsai Collection is at center, to the left of an imposing sugar maple. Metal trellises, soon to be covered in vines, range along the top two walls





LAREN BLADEN



The vine supports in Claude Monet's garden at Giverny, France, is one of many precedents for simple, straightforward, metal trellises



At Monticello Thomas Jefferson designed a thousand-foot-long terrace for his vegetable garden, which was both practical—a source of food—and experimental.

mastered the art of terracing as their primary spatial means in display gardens, meanwhile developing a tendency toward aggrandized processional space across and between terraces for spectacle and ceremony. French seventeenth-century garden designers elaborated these patterns to the point of extreme formalism, but always rooted their gardens in the measured logic of ordered planting.

Garden traditions were carried to the New World by collectors and farmers alike. Planters such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington pursued an American model of husbandry

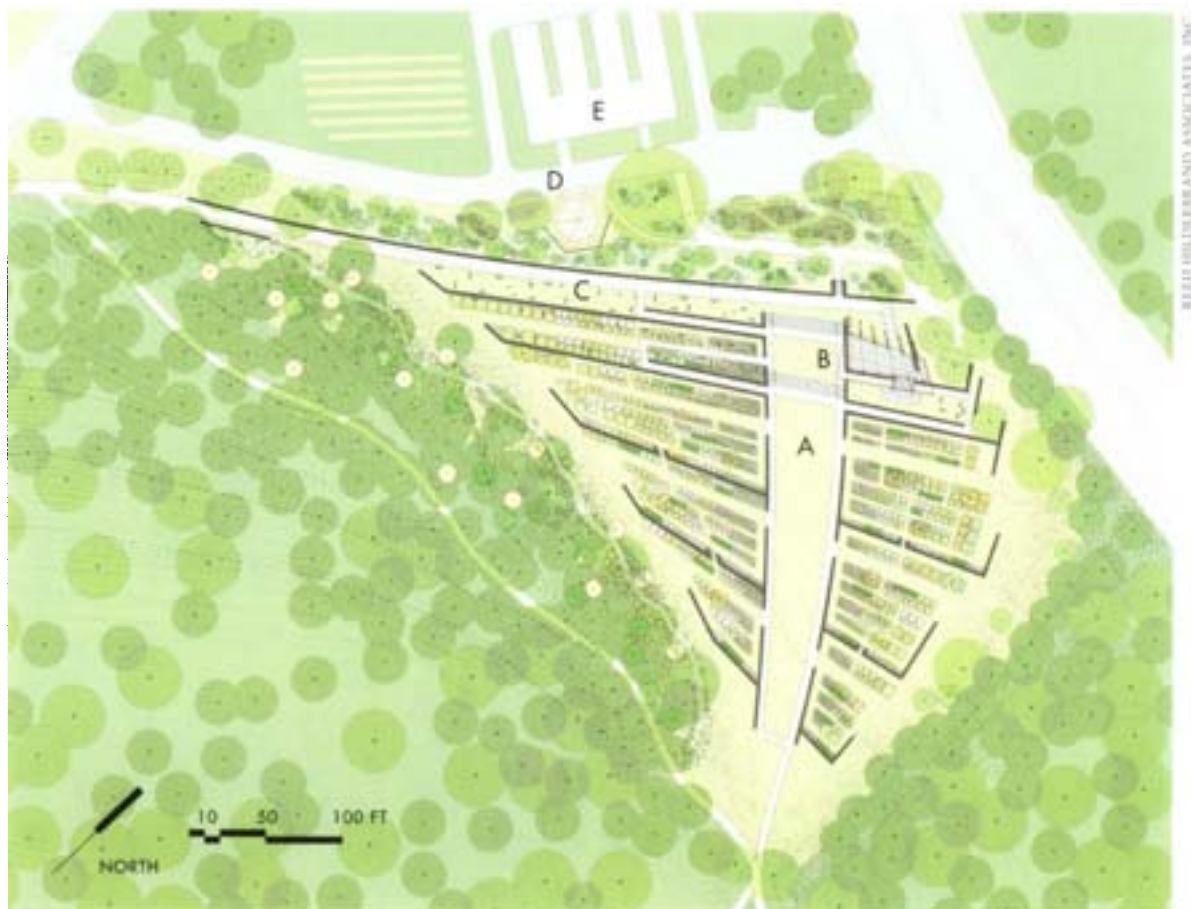
on large landholdings, carving magnificent estates out of old growth forest and patchwork farms. They organized portions of their land to capture views and exploit scenic possibilities, and with the luxury of vast holdings, they anticipated a more romanticized view of the landscape for Americans. Yet when it came to planting for production or display, both relied on practical linear arrangements and simple terracing. The rational beauty of these devices can be seen today in the restored gardens of Monticello and Mount Vernon.

For us, the task of designing a new shrub and vine garden at the beginning of the twenty-first century presented a clear challenge: to provide an arrangement that would satisfy the curatorial needs of the Arboretum staff and to develop a memorable spatial experience of the site. Here we found a convergence of horticultural science and landscape design that evolved into a unique expression of program and site.

The advantages of terracing the site were obvious. Level terraces accommodate the planting beds; slopes, ramps, and stairs provide accessible routes throughout. A main terrace, separated from the adjacent drives and greenhouse area by a stone wall nearly 500 feet in length, provides a setting for the garden's outdoor pavilion and principal space for

public events. This terrace also organizes the majority of trellises for vine display. From here, successively wider terraces descend toward the lower portion of the site. The outlines of these terraces reflect the topographic form of the site, and the shrub beds also conform in shape and proportion. A gently sloping arc of lawn, also envisioned as a gathering space, cuts across each terrace and provides a visual center to the garden.

With the shape and orientation of display terraces established, the collections were organized according to horticultural criteria—soil



The Leventritt Garden in plan A is the central lawn; B is left of the pavilion; C marks the vine structures; D the Larz Anderson Bonsai House; E the Dana Greenhouse complex

and moisture requirements, exposure and shade tolerance, size and growth habit—to reinforce the spatial form of the site. A distribution of small deciduous trees and groups of broadleaf evergreens are distributed across the scheme to amplify the garden's structure and add winter interest. The garden's edges are used to fulfill certain curatorial objectives, including the display of plants from the woodland edge community, and also accommodate relocated plants from the dwarf conifer collection that inhabited the site prior to construction.

Seen from the vantage point above the garden's main terrace, the scheme is expansive and directional, with the site's roughly triangular shape emphasizing an arcing lawn and path that gesture back toward the Arboretum's open lawns and pervasive canopy trees. Yet when viewed from below, as the true breadth of terraces and masonry walls becomes more apparent, the

scheme's dual nature is realized: it is both a traditional terraced display and an active, modern sculptural form whose essential expression is derived from the site's specific conditions.

These design intentions bring coherence to the garden and establish an identifiable spatial image for the site. The earthwork and masonry efforts required to achieve this were monumental, but they were well within the enduring traditions of garden making. Planting the collections and bringing them to maturity will take time, but the order and structure are visible at the outset and the real work of the garden—research and display, cultivating and maintaining—is well under way.

Douglas Reed and Gary Hilderbrand are principals of Reed Hilderbrand, the Leventritt Garden's landscape architects. They collaborated with Maryann Thompson, Architect.