

The Hunnewell Pinetum: A Long-Standing Family Tradition

Interview by Judith Leet

The collection of conifers begun by Horatio Hollis Hunnewell of Wellesley, Massachusetts, is now maintained by his great-grandson, Walter Hunnewell.

In 1866, Horatio Hollis Hunnewell mentions in his diary, where he recorded the ongoing improvements to his country property in Wellesley, Massachusetts, that he has prepared the ground for a Pinetum—for a collection of all the cone-bearing trees that he can make grow in New England.

Since he had already planted conifers on the grounds of his estate for fifteen years or so, one might argue that the Hunnewell arboretum was already well under way before it was officially started. Or one might date the beginning of the Pinetum as 1852, the year that Hunnewell's imposing white country house was completed and he and his family moved to Wellesley from Boston for long summer stays. Whether it is 125 or 140 years old, the Pinetum has been continuously maintained as a private arboretum by H. H. Hunnewell's family for four generations, and is now cared for knowledgeably by his great-grandson, Walter Hunnewell. In recognition of this contribution, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society recently awarded the "Hunnewell Family" its highest award, the 1990 George Robert White Medal of Honor.

The Pinetum was already a significant collection before the Arnold Arboretum was established in 1872, and Charles Sprague Sargent consulted with his older mentor H. H. Hunnewell and benefited from his

experiences with the hardiness of plants in Massachusetts as Sargent made plans for what was to become the Arnold Arboretum.

A Simple Purpose

To learn more about the present condition of this unusual, if not unique, family arboretum, we went to Wellesley to speak to Walter Hunnewell, H. H. Hunnewell's great-grandson, on a sunny summer morning. A hands-on gardener, he greeted us from his perch on a one-seater power mower, after putting in a few early hours at work on the grounds—peaceful lawns enlivened by well-cultivated and mature specimen trees.

Entering the cool, spacious hallway of the main house, we were temporarily deflected from our purpose by a display of orchids too handsome to pass by unnoted; it turns out that Walter Hunnewell, a retired executive of the Gillette Company, now divides the year between his two major horticultural pursuits—indoors in winter with his orchids and outdoors in summer in the Pinetum. Whereas he has someone to help with the orchids in the greenhouse (some of which he collected in the wild as a young businessman traveling widely in Latin America), he almost single-handedly maintains the 360 or so towering conifers now growing in the Pinetum—with what he acknowledges as the



A view of the Pinetum at the turn of the century. Photo from *The Life, Letters, and Diary of H. H. Hunnewell*, published in 1906.

indispensable help of power rotary motors.

Until about ten years ago, Walter Hunnewell lived close to the family home overlooking Lake Waban and would stop by to help his aging mother care for the Pinetum. His father, Walter Hunnewell, Jr., who died in 1964, had assumed responsibility for the family Pinetum in 1921 and had maintained it attentively for forty years; but in the fifteen years that Walter's mother had lived on the property as a widow, the condition of the Pinetum had gradually declined. "She was interested in it because her husband had been interested, but she was not *personally* interested and she was already eighty when her husband died," Walter Hunnewell explained. "I lived next door and would come

over to do some work, as did my brother Willard and sister Jane, who lived nearby; but basically the Pinetum went downhill. The grass wasn't cut as often, and weed trees sprouted up!"

When Walter Hunnewell moved into the family home in 1980 upon the death of his mother, much restoration of the collection needed to be done. "We had to do relabeling, and Steve Spongberg of the Arnold Arboretum, starting about 1974, was very helpful in identifying trees where the labels had disappeared, as were Rich Warren and Zsolt Debreczy, later on.

"Identification is tricky because botanists can't seem to make up their minds: for example, *Picea bicolor* was renamed *Picea alcoqui-*

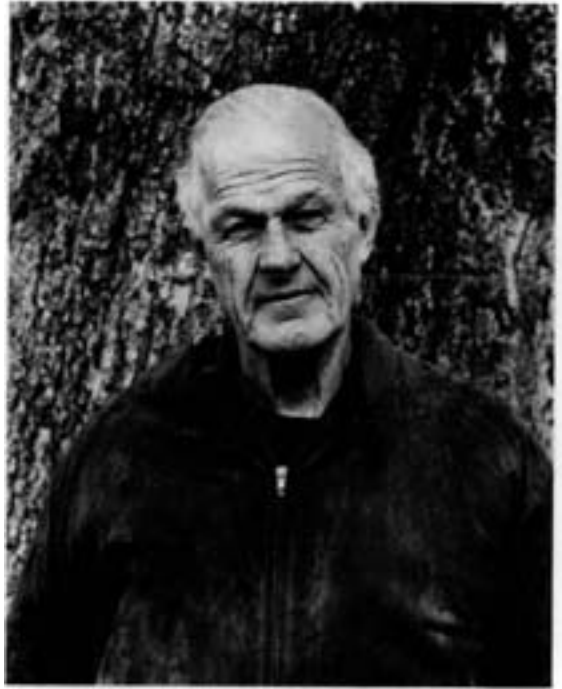
ana, but then was changed back to *P. bicolor*. And looking at the same tree, experts will have different opinions about what it is, so it's difficult to know whether to change a label or not.

"The simple objective of my great-grandfather, H. H. Hunnewell, was to find out what trees would grow in the climate of Massachusetts. At that time no one had any idea which trees would live here and which wouldn't. 'I'll make a collection of all the coniferous trees that I can find,' he wrote in his diary, 'and see what can grow here.' Of course he could do it on a scale I couldn't possibly do now," said Walter Hunnewell. "He'd experiment with small seedlings, perhaps 50 plants of each species, setting out 2,000 plants at a time. He had a mammoth nursery and would plant them all out, employing perhaps thirty gardeners on his many projects."

Lessons in Hardiness

Though he had no formal training in horticulture, H. H. Hunnewell proceeded by observation, trial and error, and patience: if he lost fifty plants the first winter that he experimented with cone-bearing trees from New Zealand, he would plant fifty more the next year. He would continue to experiment doggedly and did not discourage easily. Those seedlings that survived in the sheltered nursery he would eventually plant in the Pinetum; when set out to face their first New England winters, many of the young trees would be winter-killed; over time these many losses narrowed down the selection of plants that he had hoped to introduce.

H. H. Hunnewell had many good growing years up to 1867 and confidently wrote, in the *American Journal of Horticulture*, that his efforts were worthwhile, despite the heavy labor and financial investments: "We have reason for congratulation, upwards of fifty new evergreen trees having been found adapted to our climate." But by the very next year, he recorded in his diary, "The past winter has been very destructive to evergreens—the most



Walter Hunnewell next to "the old oak" on the front lawn, the only tree that predates H. H. Hunnewell's plantings. Photo by Peter Del Tredici.

so of any I ever experienced." After listing the many species that had been browned or badly injured or killed, he added, "All this is very discouraging."

Walter Hunnewell speaks feelingly of his great-grandfather's experiments and subsequent losses—sometimes of every single plant: "Eventually, it was found that plants chosen from the northernmost limit of their range—where they had adapted to snow and freezing conditions for many thousands of years—were more hardy, and H. H. Hunnewell began to bring those trees in. Although he tried and tried, he just couldn't grow the cedar of Lebanon, *Cedrus libani*, and wrote in his diary, 'it just isn't hardy here in Boston.' But later, around 1900, a hardier variety was found in the mountains of Turkey and introduced by the Arnold Arboretum. Some of these were planted here, one of which is now particularly



The main house built by H. H. Hunnewell in 1851. Photo by Peter Del Tredici.

fine—some say rather better than those in the Arnold Arboretum. The cedars of Lebanon grown in England and Europe have a much broader shape, with spreading branches; the branches dip and turn up—very picturesque; here ours are straight as a beanpole. One explanation is that the hardier ones come from high in the mountains where only straight ones could survive; the spreading ones are sitting ducks for heavy snow.”

The Hunnewell family and the Arnold Arboretum have collaborated on plant-hunting projects over the years; the Hunnewells helped support E. H. Wilson’s trips to Asia in the early 1900s, and in turn received plant materials for their collection, which now contains some of the oldest surviving examples of Asian introductions. “Our relationship with the Arnold Arboretum goes back to the beginning of the Arboretum,” said

Walter Hunnewell. “In the beginning, the Arboretum got a lot of good advice from my great-grandfather. He and Professor Sargent were good friends. My great-grandfather was the older of the two and had started first—but the two of them worked together for twenty years, and Hunnewell gave a lot of good advice to Sargent. Since 1900, it’s been the other way: for twenty years we helped the Arnold Arboretum; for ninety years, they have helped us,” said Walter Hunnewell, amused by the imbalance of favors.

“H. H. Hunnewell wasn’t a botanist; he was an amateur who became knowledgeable. He lived to age ninety-three and had a wonderful full life—never was sick. He grew interested in horticulture in the 1840s when he was about thirty-five; he was fifty or so when he started the Pinetum. His life was more than usually interesting.”

Horatio Hollis Hunnewell was born in 1810 in Watertown, Massachusetts, the son of Walter Hunnewell, a general doctor, and Susanna Cooke. Invited to Paris by relatives as a boy of fifteen to learn the banking business, Hunnewell labored for years at Welles & Company, a bank that exchanged currency for traveling Americans, and earned a considerable fortune. He fully expected to spend the rest of his life in France, but in the severe financial crisis of 1837, the bank, on the verge of failure, went out of business, and he lost everything. "All my brilliant prospects vanished, and the sleepless nights I passed in thinking what I had best do under these totally unexpected circumstances were many," he wrote in his old age. He returned to America dispirited, believing his productive life was all but over. In time he "drifted into railroads," as he put it, and moved on to far greater financial success than he had ever thought possible.

A Country Place

"H. H. Hunnewell did things very thoughtfully," said Walter Hunnewell. "When his prospects improved in Boston after the failure of the bank in Paris, he determined to build himself a nice house. Most of the land he planned to use for this country house was his wife Isabella's, that is, his father-in-law's land. Throughout the 1840s, he built the boundaries, put up a stone wall on Washington Street, and set out seedlings, thousands of seedlings of all kinds, forest trees, evergreens, fruit trees—apple, pear, cherry!"

The house, built from 1851 to 1852, was singled out and illustrated in the 1859 edition of *Downing's Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, edited by Henry Winthrop Sargent, a good friend and cousin. "H. H. Hunnewell had an idea," Walter Hunnewell said, "of what he wanted to do for the grounds—for the forty acres; and he did it himself, without a landscape architect. In time he bought an additional property of fourteen acres that became the Pinetum. This piece of ground was perfect for the Pinetum because

of its gravelly, acid soil and interesting topography.

"The trees have no set arrangement; they are not laid out in rows. H. H. Hunnewell just planted trees of all different shapes and colors, mixed together. To me it looks better than, say, if he had grown all the hemlocks together. When Hunnewell planted an *Abies cilicica*, probably in 1860, he might have put out a ten-year-old tree. It is one of the older ones; we know that because it is one of the bigger trees. He didn't keep records; that was not his objective. He didn't particularly care where it came from, or when exactly it was planted, or whether it was a true type specimen—those things that interest us didn't make too much difference to him."

Maintaining the Pinetum

The precise number of trees living in the Pinetum has varied over the years. Walter Hunnewell's computerized printout, as of the summer of 1990, lists 354 trees. At one time the Pinetum had as many as 400 conifers. Some of the new plantings specifically replace trees damaged or destroyed by natural causes. "Back in June of 1988, a *Picea pungens* was hit by a bolt of lightning, which jumped to an *Abies veitchii*, and killed both. I planted new trees in the same spots. I let them live in the Pinetum for a year; if they survive, they then make the computerized list. I am horrified to see how small the young plants look in the Pinetum next to the full-grown trees. In the ground they seem minute, no higher than ten inches!"

When he sets out new trees, Walter Hunnewell's attitude is much like that of his great-grandfather: "H. H. Hunnewell started the Pinetum when he was forty or fifty. It didn't bother him at all that he wouldn't live to see mature trees. He lived to see them grow for thirty or forty years, and he was planting small trees all the time. And I feel as he did; when I plant young trees, if they do well and grow nicely, it gives me a mammoth kick.

"There is a great temptation to plant them too close together when small. The branches



Abies cilicica, planted in 1870, is the largest conifer in the Pinetum. Walter Hunnewell is standing at the base of the tree. Photo by Peter Del Tredici.

eventually will go out twenty or more feet. I have planted some too close, but on the other hand, all won't grow to be nice trees, so I weed those out. If two particularly good trees are too close together, you have to make a sacrifice. Or let them grow close together. I differ here from H. H. Hunnewell and my father; they wanted a tree with open space all around it, but after all, these are forest trees. Why shouldn't they be close enough together so that, as in nature, they lose their lower branches?

"I don't like it when they grow—or so it seems to me—unnaturally when planted too far apart. That is, the lower branches hit the ground and root, and in twenty or thirty years, they reroot, distorting the normal appearance of that type of tree. Peter Ashton, the former

director of the Arnold Arboretum, remarked on the way a Japanese *Chamaecyparis* had grown unnaturally when all alone. It had a mammoth jungle of young trunks growing around the original *Chamaecyparis*, and I don't like that. I prefer to plant them close enough so that the lower branches get shaded out and eventually die."

Clipping the Topiary

Introducing and collecting conifers was only a part of H. H. Hunnewell's Wellesley garden. He began to introduce many varieties of rhododendrons unknown in New England but widely used on English estates, and in addition to opening his own rhododendrons to the public, he sponsored an exhibition on the Boston Common in 1873 to popularize them. He took boundless pleasure in improving and beautifying his property over the years, creating fanciful gardens—an orangery, a grapery, orchid greenhouses, French- and English-style gardens, as well as lilac and azalea displays. His Italian garden of clipped trees on six terraces—stretching for two hundred yards along the lake below—was all built by hand shovels. "I hate to think," Walter Hunnewell paused, "of the effort involved. But he had plenty of labor to help; photos show him planting with six or eight men." For the Italian garden, H. H. Hunnewell experimented with clipping native American evergreens into formal geometric shapes; previously, European species had been used for such topiary effects.

To maintain this steeply terraced topiary garden, Walter Hunnewell's four grown children and a son-in-law now gather every year or two and, working as a team for an entire week, trim the trees. "I pick a week in August and hire a tree specialist with a cherry picker to trim the tallest. My children and I set to work on the middle-level trees—still quite tall—and do it the old-fashioned way with a tall ladder, which two or three of us hold upright with ropes twisted around our hips, while someone else is up on the ladder trimming. Those on the ground can move the ladder back and forth and maneuver it around.

There's lots of yelling back and forth—someone's pulling too hard or not hard enough. If the person on the ladder looks down, it's a long way to fall."

For the past fourteen or so years, the Hunnewells, including Walter's wife Maria Luisa, have pruned the topiary garden in this way. "My children have to take a week out of their vacations—but usually all come. One did not come the last time, and there were lots of comments about that. It's a certain amount of fun. They all in a way enjoy it; I get the most pleasure—partially because it gets the job done."

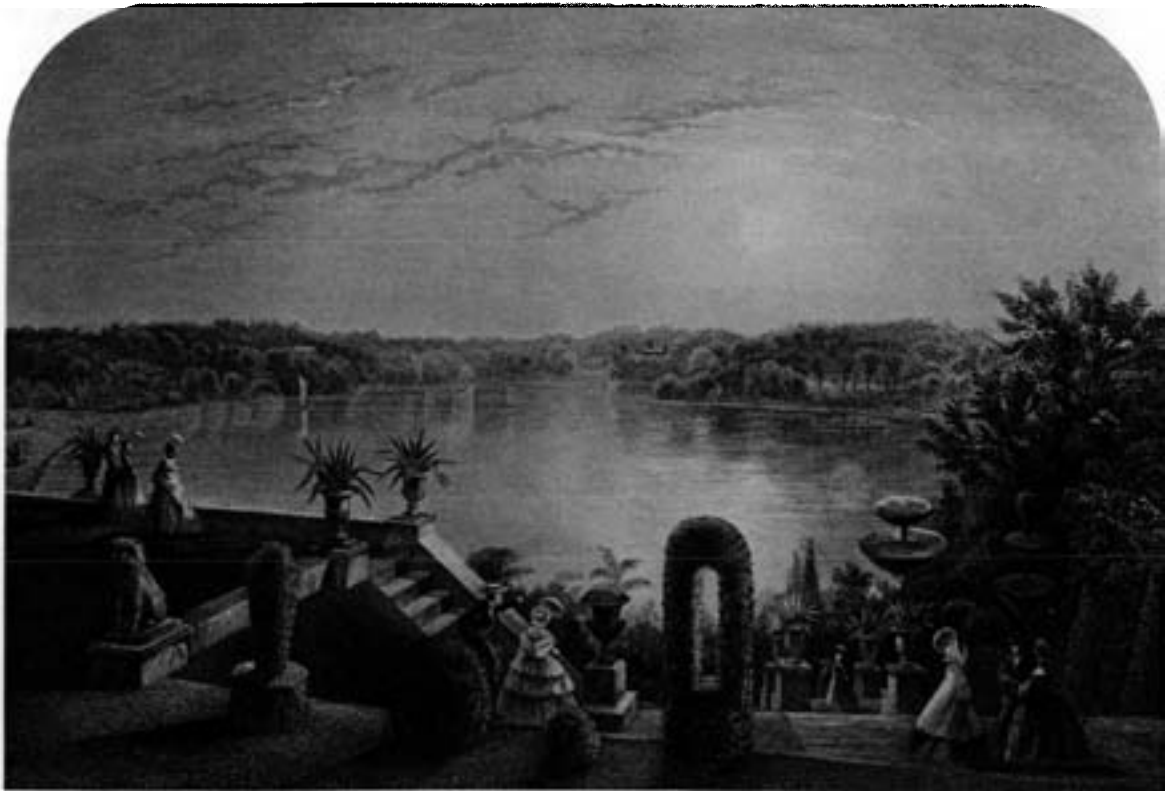
When asked if the succeeding generations had maintained the Pinetum to H. H. Hunnewell's standards, Walter Hunnewell replied, "Very much so. Up until 1929, there was plenty of labor; the workers basically cut the

grass and weeds in the Pinetum with a horse-drawn mower or by hand with a scythe; it was labor-intensive and, because the land was steep, difficult work.

"My father struggled through the Depression, and there were times when he had an awful time. The staff was cut; my father, with the head gardener, put the children to work. All four children enjoyed working in the Pinetum, including my sister Jane. We removed the dead wood, trimmed out the dead branches, cut down trees, spread fertilizer, manure. It's fair to say, however, that, overall, the rhododendron were my father's primary interest."

Another Generation

Since he became responsible for the Pinetum, Walter Hunnewell has experimented with



"Italian garden and lake at Wellesley near Boston. Residence of H. H. Hunnewell, Esq." From the sixth edition (1859) of A. J. Downing's Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening.

several innovative methods to facilitate caring for the property. "We tried grazing a horse or a cow—to see if that kept the grass down; it didn't work. Then I found a good mower that hydraulically lifts the rotary blade up and down. That mower has made an enormous difference. In a short time, I can do what it took three or four men all summer long to do. I also have a tractor that comes in with a bigger rotary mower to do the flat areas, and that too has made a great difference. For the steepest slopes, we use a rotary handmower that runs on the end of a rope. Someone can stand on flat ground above and, like a dog on the end of a leash, send it down the bank.

"I can handle the Pinetum with the help of my children; they are good about it although, sometimes, when they are busy with their work, it is difficult to make time. I now do

a minimum amount of fertilizing and spraying, but basically the trees are very healthy. I always want to add trees I don't have; I put them out mainly in the month of April when I dig them out of the nursery and move them to the Pinetum." Walter Hunnewell consulted his computer printout of trees to determine how many new trees he now puts out each year. "In 1989, I planted eighteen trees—one that I planted out in April was dead by October; in 1990, I planted twelve trees."

The Pinetum now is very full and Walter Hunnewell will have to determine which trees to remove in the future. "Some are likely candidates, such as an *Abies concolor*, a white fir, about forty years old, that had its top blown out in a storm. With four leaders broken off, the fir ended up looking like a bush." Deciding it would never be what it should be, he



The "Italian Garden" at the Hunnewell estate. Photographed in 1990 by Peter Del Tredici.

cut it down without compunction. "You can always plant another," he added, summing up his very reasonable approach to gardening.

Asked about his own children—the fifth generation's future interest in caring for the Pinetum—Walter Hunnewell said: "All are in a way interested in the place, which is their home; they'd like to keep it going."

Unlike so many magnificent gardens, constructed with great care and labor, that are abandoned or neglected by later generations, the Hunnewells have carried on devotedly the legacy of Horatio Hollis Hunnewell. In late

1990, the condition of the Pinetum is flourishing and under the capable hands of the fourth generation of a family devoted to its well-being and to excellence in horticulture.

References

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