



Alangium platanifolium, from China and Japan.
(Photo by Niall Dunne)

The Centennial Summer Garden

Teaming Up to Commemorate the Seattle Garden Club's 100th Anniversary

BY JASON MORSE

For a landscape architect, getting the chance to work in a place like the Washington Park Arboretum is a true honor. Last year, when I was asked by Paige Miller, the executive director of the Arboretum Foundation, whether my firm might be interested in helping to create a grant proposal for a new garden along Azalea Way in the Arboretum, I did not hesitate. She told me the grant was to be made by the Seattle Garden Club to commemorate their 2017 centenary, and that they would be choosing

from among four proposals for compelling landscape projects throughout the city.

Paige had proposed a lovely spot at the north end of Azalea Way Pond, where a big tree had just come down and left an open space at the water's edge. She also suggested a summer-focused plant palette to help bridge the gap between the magnolias, azaleas and cherries of spring and the colorful leaves of autumn.

We prepared a proposal, and I was honored to present our ideas to the members



Hydrangea macrophylla 'Blue Wave' can also be
seen in Rhododendron Glen.
(Photo by Niall Dunne)

of the Seattle Garden Club—along with Sarah Reichard, who lent her knowledge, passion and gravitas to the effort. Several days later we found out that our proposal had been selected for the grant, with the Foundation providing matching funds to help ensure a successful project.

A Working Collaboration

As we began to think about how the design would take shape, I knew that this would be a complicated effort. My past experience at the Arboretum had taught me that this is indeed a kitchen with many, many cooks. The Foundation staff, its Board, members of the Master Plan Implementation Group (MPIG), Seattle Parks and Recreation staff, staff of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens, the Friends of Olmsted Parks, the Seattle Urban Forestry Commission, Iain Robertson from the UW Department of Landscape Architecture and, of course, the members of the Seattle Garden Club

Enkianthus campanulatus 'Red Bells',
cultivar of a Japanese species. (Photo by Molbak's)



itself would each have a say in the design, and, in many cases, have veto power over just about any decision that was made.

In my mind, a design process with this many passionate stakeholders could have three possible outcomes: a watered down effort with no offending elements, but also no character or charm to speak of; a total disaster with one or more of the constituents feeling alienated or disappointed; or a garden that embodied the best of all the expertise, creative energy and passion of each of the participants. As I write this, with the design finished and shovels about to hit the ground, I am pleased, proud, and maybe just a little surprised to report that it seems that the third outcome has been achieved. And I believe that it is because of this diversity of opinions and viewpoints, not in spite of it, that we have arrived at a good result.

Iain Robertson's name was mentioned at the first meeting where this project was discussed. In addition to being a well-respected member of the Landscape Architecture faculty at the University of Washington, Iain is largely responsible for the design of the Arboretum's Witt Winter Garden, which was immediately put forward as the gold standard for a small, display-oriented garden like the one we were beginning to design. I had met Iain once or twice before, and know many people in my field who consider him a mentor, but I had never had the pleasure of working with him or getting to know him well. Iain generously donated his time to collaborate on this project and provide invaluable input. Like all the best practitioners of our craft, Iain offered insights on the integration of plant selection, grading, views, materiality and spatial definition with the overall design concept. I found myself wishing that I had been able to experience having him as a teacher, as so many of my colleagues and friends have. I'm hoping this will not be our last collaboration.

Curation Committee Guidance

As the design process got underway, I was a bit nervous about working with the curation staff at the UW Botanic Gardens. Among my landscape architecture peers, I am considered a bona fide



Stewartia malacodendron, a southeast U.S. native.
(Photo by Richard Bonnett/Wikimedia Commons)

INSET: Site of the future Centennial Garden.
(Photo by Randall Hitchin)

“plant geek,” but it’s a very different experience working with people who have dedicated their careers to studying, caring for, and teaching about plants. And these people manage the plant collection at one of the most revered and well-respected botanical gardens in the world. Would they think me a dilettante, trying to pretty the place up without enough consideration of deeper horticultural themes or the inclusion of enough exotic specimens? Or would they ignore my ideas altogether, preferring instead to hand over a finished plant list and arrangement and expect me to just “draw it up”?

Thankfully, neither scenario came to pass. I showed up to the office of Ray Larson, Curator of the UW Botanic Gardens, with a preliminary plant list and a proposed layout in hand. During that and many subsequent meetings with Ray and other UWBG staff, I had some of the most meaningful conversations about plants of my career. They

raised questions, challenged assumptions, and compelled me to consider every decision more carefully than I might otherwise. For example, we added *Enkianthus* to tie in with the other ericaceous plants in this part of the Arboretum, switched from spring-flowering *Magnolia wilsonii* to *M. virginiana* to extend the summer bloom period, and spaced the plants out farther than normal to allow for these planting beds to look as good in 40 years as they will after two.

The UW staff introduced me to plants I had never heard of, and reminded me to adhere to the highest possible standards of horticultural practice. They were always open and respectful of my ideas, and those of the other stakeholders. Their boss, Fred Hoyt, stood in my corner when I advocated for the project in public meetings. Throughout this process, our interaction has



The Garden Plan

Situated along historic Azalea Way at the north end of Azalea Way Pond, the garden will consist of a wood mulch pathway that meanders through a widely spaced grove of existing cedars, poplars and cherries. The centerpiece of the garden will be a long, curving bench/wall modeled after some historic examples of masonry in other parts of the Arboretum. The bench will offer views across the pond to the historic Overlook gazebo, perched on the hill above. A crushed rock path and terrace area will provide a small gathering space in front of the terrace. At the end of the bench/wall, a stone plinth will house a commemorative plaque to honor the contributions made by the Seattle Garden Club to the Arboretum, which include the funding for the original Olmsted design of the Arboretum and the restoration of the Overlook in 2013.

A large, existing cedar provides a backdrop for the planting design, which celebrates the colors of summer. *Hydrangea* will be the star of the show, with big drifts of *H. macrophylla*, *H. serrata*, *H. quercifolia* and *H. paniculata* cultivars leading the visitor through the garden. Individual specimens of *Magnolia*, *Stewartia* and *Oxydendrum* will help to define the space on either side of the path. Hardy fuchsia, *Calycanthus*, *Olearia* and *Alangium* will round out the flowering shrub layer, with *Sarcococca ruscifolia* and low *Taxus* acting as dark green foils. Sweeping masses of *Hakonechloa* and *Astilbe* will provide foreground at the interior of the garden. From Azalea Way itself, a planting of *Rhododendron* 'Dreamland' will provide a tie-in to the swaths of spring color along the historic greenway, and will act as a dark-green background for the mantle of 'Flower Carpet Amber' roses that will bloom throughout the summer at the front of the bed. Three memorial benches will be placed along the path in the garden's interior.

served as a reminder of what an incredibly special place we are working in.

Garden Club Know-How

The members of the Garden Club were no less rigorous. We asked that the Club form a panel at the outset to work directly with the design team and report our progress to the larger group. This panel, led by Jenny Wyatt, took its role very seriously. They also asked a lot of thorough questions, offered great ideas, and demonstrated a love and knowledge of horticulture not often found outside of academic circles. I have looked forward to each of our meetings and know that they will be able to see the direct results of their wisdom, care and enthusiasm in the finished garden.

They have turned out to be collaborators as much as clients, and have contributed far more than money to this project. Yes, I believe that *Epimedium* will perform better than *Liriope* in that situation. No, there is no reason we shouldn't add more hydrangeas to that grouping. And, yes, those *Chamaecyparis* would probably grow tall enough over time to create a blind spot.

I have often wondered whether the Seattle Garden Club has among its ranks some members whose grandmothers helped to hire the Olmsted brothers to draw up the original plans for the Arboretum in 1934. Through their recent gift, and their dedication to the design process, these current members are ensuring that their own grandchildren will be able to walk through the Arboretum and experience their legacy well into the future.

Dedication of Parks Department

Our friends at Seattle Parks and Recreation have also been invaluable collaborators. Andy Scheffer, Michael Shiosaki and Garrett Farrell have shown once again that the way it gets permitted, the way it gets built, and the way it gets taken care of are not just phases of the process but should inform every decision along the way. They display a passion for their work and a dedication to their stewardship of the open spaces they care for that is truly inspiring. As the construction of the garden moves forward, their



Carolina allspice (*Calycanthus floridus* 'Aphrodite'), another Southeast native.
(Photo by Mark Weathington, JC Raulston Arboretum)

role will greatly increase, and we look forward to lots of meaningful collaboration and problem-solving in the months ahead.

Along with my colleagues at AHBL, I have collaborated with or presented before every person or group in that long list of stakeholders above. Each interaction—from presenting to the Friends of Olmsted Parks to meetings with the Garden Club to the muddy site walks with UWBG staff—has provided insight and a reinforcement of my belief that the people involved in this field are some of the most genuine, passionate and conscientious to be found anywhere.

At the beginning of the project, the idea that we would be seeking advice and consent from so many different groups of people seemed daunting at best and potentially disastrous at worst. But with a delicate balance of strong convictions and an open mind, it has been possible to listen, learn and arrive at a far better result than would otherwise have been achieved.

The garden is scheduled to be completed at the end of summer. In the years to come, I will be watching it grow, happy that I was just one of the many people who had a hand in its creation. ∞

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