Maymont Celebrates the 100th Anniversary of the Italian Garden

“Italian gardens of a style comparing favorably with anything of this kind in the South have been laid off and are now being completed at ‘Maymont,’ the home of Major and Mrs. James H. Dooley, in Henrico County. Drawings, photographs and measurements of the best specimens of this character of artistic work abroad have been used by the landscape gardeners in charge of the work, and while not yet complete the gardens give every promise of showing under Virginia skies, on the hills above the falls of the James, the same effects as in the palatial estates of Southern Europe.”

- from “Italian Gardens at Home of Maj. J.H. Dool ey: Landscape Gardeners Make Beautiful Picture at Maymont, on the James River in Henrico County,” Times Dispatch, Richmond, Virginia, October 12, 1908.

The Times Dispatch article goes on to say that the idea of constructing an Italian Garden at Maymont may have been conceived by Major Dooley as a surprise for his wife, Sallie. However, considering Mrs. Dooley’s intense interest in development of the Maymont landscape, Maymont’s curatorial staff is confident that she took part in the conception and planning of this major Maymont garden.

Noland and Baskervill of Richmond designed the garden using elements of the classical style – fountains, terraces, geometrically-shaped beds and the dramatic pergola. Dates on the architectural drawings for the pergola and dome show that the garden was conceived in 1907. Work continued in 1908 with the addition of the Cascade, and in 1909, the lower terrace was designed. All features were completed in 1910.

In 2010, as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of this popular Richmond landmark, one thing is clear: the Italian Garden at Maymont was built for love. Whether it was a surprise or not, Major Dooley surely invested in the project as a sign of affection for his wife, who held a great passion for gardens, and by all indications, Italy, its art and culture held very special appeal for the couple. In fact, they traveled to Italy during the summer of 1910 just as Maymont’s Italian Garden was nearing completion and plans were being made for their Italian Renaissance-style summer home, Swannanoa.

An air of romance still lingers in the garden today, now the site of thousands of weddings, countless marriage proposals, first dates and hand-in-hand strolls since the estate was given to the City of Richmond in 1925.

“Over the last few years of calling Richmond my home, I’ve often ended up spending hours in the gardens and greenery, relaxing in the calm and taking refuge under a tall tree,” said Maymont visitor, Joe Elias. “It was only fitting that we would choose the Italian Garden as the place for our marriage ceremony. We felt as though we were in another world; perhaps on a movie set where each stem, petal and blade of grass had been carefully placed to give the most memorable effect. We said our vows under the rotunda, hand in hand, with all of the people we loved and cared for throughout our lives.”

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Elias' declaration is a sentiment that is heard often in reference to the flower-filled city oasis. Maymont Facebook fans regularly post comments and photos from their garden weddings, and the Treasure Maymont video produced for the Vintage Maymont auction last year includes two Italian Garden wedding stories, including Elias’ ceremony.

Another allure to the garden is its otherworldly beauty. Appearing to be transported from another time and place, the garden is a frequent muse for artists, photographers and poets. One anonymous writer, known as The Stroller, waxed poetic about the garden and its blooms in articles written for The Richmond News Leader from 1935 to 1941.

An excerpt from one Stroller article stated: “In the Italian garden there are roses everywhere; clinging to the pergola, and swaying from every rose bed in so many shadings of color from deepest velvety red to palest pink, and white that is magnificent in its luminous purity, that it is almost impossible to go on without stopping first on one of the many benches to gaze one’s fill and enjoy the intoxicating perfume of not only the roses but the fragrant locust penants hanging over the cascade steps.”

The Maymont Foundation has celebrated the 100th anniversary of the garden this year with an Evening of Shakespeare (sponsored by Arnett & Associates, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation and the Italian American Cultural Association of Virginia, Inc.) and a Sunset Reception for Maymont Council members and friends, both held in May, as well as a Summer Solstice fundraiser for the garden in June. This summer, the foundation held a contest for the public to submit old photographs of the garden, including weddings held there. Winning submissions for both the oldest wedding and non-wedding images were taken in 1978, and they can now be seen on a 100th anniversary web page at www.maymont.org/IG100. The pictorial web page also includes some of the earliest photographs of the garden, dating back to circa 1907-1910, as well as vintage postcards and more recent images.

Tributes to the garden continue this fall. With the help of Richmond Time Lapse, a time lapse video of the Italian Garden will capture its blooming cycles and growth in August and September. The garden’s 100th anniversary will also be the focal point of the 13th annual Vintage Maymont auction, to be held at the Jefferson Hotel on Friday, October 15. One of the items to be auctioned is a rare private dinner party amidst the blooming landscape.

Over the years, generous contributions from individual donors, private foundations and the Maymont Council, a volunteer group that supports the conservation of Maymont’s historical features and collections, have provided for ongoing restorations in the garden. One of the largest individual restoration gifts, given in 2000 by the late Mrs. Lora Robins who was also a founding member of the Maymont Foundation, funded the restoration of the beams of the Italian Garden pergola.

In 1979, the Maymont Foundation was among the first historic sites to receive an award from the Historic Preservation Fund for landscape restoration jointly administered by the Department of Interior’s Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service and the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. The project goal was to assure the physical and historical integrity of the terraced Italian Garden, including the garden paths, architectural and sculptural elements. Most recently, in 2007, the Italian fountain at the western end of the garden was restored through Maymont Council funds.

Summer annuals and roses will continue to bloom and grow in the Italian Garden through the end of October. The garden, which is open to the public year-round, is located closest to Maymont's Hampton Street entrance at 1700 Hampton Street in Richmond, Virginia. For more information, call Maymont at 804-358-7166, ext. 310 or visit www.maymont.org.

Since 1975, Maymont has been operated and maintained by the non-profit Maymont Foundation. Donations from individuals, corporate sponsors and foundations enable Maymont to remain open to everyone.