

# Azaleas in the Life and Work of Beatrix Farrand

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Asticou Azalea Garden

Beatrix Farrand was one of the great landscape gardeners of the twentieth century. She was a lover of azaleas, native azaleas especially, but it would be hard to detect this from her commissioned work, which, though abundant, has been ravaged by time. Of her two surviving masterpieces, the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Garden in Seal Harbor, Maine, and Dumbarton Oaks, the estate of Robert Woods and Mildred Bliss in Washington, D. C., only the latter makes use of azaleas. The Rockefeller Garden combines a Chinese wall, Oriental sculptures, and an interior of perennials and annuals in the style of English border gardens. Dumbarton Oaks is a formal Italianate garden of awe-inspiring complexity, in which one small garden among fourteen distinct enclosures features a low hedge of azaleas with large white

flowers (*Rhododendron mucronatum*). This garden is called “The Star,” taking its name from decorative astrological figures of lead—Aries, Capricorn, Pegasus, and the Phoenix—that surround a lead star and pebble mosaic set in the terrace. Farrand also placed an “occasional plant” of the same azalea, among other “fine-leaved evergreen sorts,” against the walls of the Green Garden, which is a large space adjacent to the mansion.

To grasp Farrand’s engagement with native azaleas it is necessary to look to the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, a section of Boston, where her formal training in landscape art began at the end of the nineteenth century, and to the Asticou Azalea Garden in Northeast Harbor, Maine, where her large private collection of azaleas found a loving and very beautiful

home after she made the difficult decision to dismantle her house and garden in Reef Point, Maine, in 1955. Both are remarkable stories in the history of American gardening. The Asticou story is near to miraculous.

It is not obvious that a child of the New York aristocracy would become engaged with native azaleas. Farrand was born in a townhouse in 1872 to members of the New York and Philadelphia elite. She lived in New York until her marriage to a Yale professor of history in 1913. She traveled to Europe. Though she came at a young age to know the American wilderness, it was the wilderness of Maine, not North Carolina. All of her clients would come from the same social stratum and the same places. None of her commissions were south of Washington, D. C. Most were in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, and New York. She worked on the campuses of Yale and Princeton, and on the White House grounds for the wives of Woodrow Wilson. She designed the grave markers at Sagamore Hill, Oyster Bay, New York for President Theodore Roosevelt and his son Quentin, who was killed in World War I. When her husband became director of the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, in the late 1920s, her career suffered. Her one major, gratifying commission in California came through her Dumbarton Oaks friendship with Mildred Bliss, who helped arrange a consultancy at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden that lasted from 1938 to 1950. She gained influence there during World War II because the garden's architect and botanist, Lockwood de Forest, Jr., was overseas, but design responsibility still was shared between them. The Northeast, Maine especially, was her home.

The origins of her formative encounter with native azaleas are traceable to Brookline, Massachusetts, and her tutelage at Holm Lea, the estate of Charles Sprague Sargent. Sargent was the pioneering director of the Arnold Arboretum, which Harvard created as a place for the collection of woody shrubs and trees from the Northern Hemisphere. The Arnold Arboretum was founded in the 1870s, at about the time Farrand was born. Already interested in plants and garden design before she turned twenty, she first visited it in 1890, and soon was invited into the Sargents' home. She made extended visits in 1893 and 1894, with tours led by Sargent, at a time when the Arboretum was taking shape with roads and trails laid out by his Brookline neighbor, Frederick Law Olmsted. In 1894, the Sargents took Farrand on a visit to Biltmore, the Vanderbilt estate in North Carolina, for which Olmsted was designing the landscape.

There is nothing to indicate that the Biltmore visit in particular awakened Farrand to the beauty of native azaleas, for they had already been planted on the grounds of the Arboretum. Indeed, Harvard to this day proudly claims credit for the introduction of *R. vaseyi*, the pink native of North Carolina that figures prominently in the collections of both the contemporary Arnold Arboretum and Asticou in Maine. According to the Arboretum's website, *R. vaseyi* was named in 1878 by Asa Gray, Harvard's pioneering botanist, and accessioned by the Arboretum two years later. So Farrand could easily have met it there, and we know from an entry in a notebook she kept in 1894 that she met *R. calendulaceum* on an outing with Sargent. He was taking her to the Arboretum, and they stopped on the way to look at the collection left by Harvard's Professor Francis Parkman, who had died a year earlier. The sight was dreary, Farrand's notes say, the house being torn down, paths overgrown, and long grass springing up everywhere. But the "Azalea calendulacea" was still fine.

Farrand would remain a friend of Sargent and regular visitor to Holm Lea until his death and a friend of the Arboretum until hers. Fittingly, she returned in a professional capacity as a landscape design consultant, her last commission, between 1946 and 1950, when she was in her 70s. At this time she designed an azalea border that is prominently located along the road through which most visitors enter the Arboretum from Boston's Arborway, as the highway has come to be called.

In a brief essay for *Arnoldia*, the Arboretum's periodic bulletin, she described the azalea border in 1949. There was a series of groups with colors that "will harmonize and give interest from earliest spring to latest autumn." Among the earliest would be *R. mucronulatum*, not a native but an introduction from China, that she described appreciatively: "The crinkled petals ... when they first appear, look as though they had been ill packed during the winter in a small valise, but they soon lose their wrinkles in the sun and air and show their deep maroon brown dots at the centre of the tremulous wind-swept flowers." She proceeded to list lavender species that bloomed early, pinks beginning with *R. vaseyi*, "which is hardy in the far north and flowers generously each year if given proper food," *R. schlippenbachii*, a Chinaman "that has taken kindly to our country and is never dull or dowdy," *R. arborescens* "with its deep red stamens lifting themselves from the pale pink flowers," *R. viscosum*, "the latest and sweetest and tallest of our native sorts," then nudiflorums (*R.*

*perichlymenoides*) and roseums (*R. canescens*), and finally *R. calendulaceum* “and their fellows in the orange scarlet and yellow shades.” Her drawings accompany the text. The azalea border survives, somewhat revised by a curatorial review and renovation in 2007, with due acknowledgment to Farrand on the Arboretum’s website (<http://arboretum.harvard.edu/plants/featured-plants/azalea-border>)

The Asticou story is more dramatic, for it grows out of Farrand’s failure to achieve preservation of her own garden in Bar Harbor. Having failed, she chose demolition, but through an act of courage and rare creativity on the part of a prominent local citizen, Charles K. Savage, her azaleas were saved and became the core of a new garden. Even without bearing her name, it could not be a more fitting evocation of her life, dedicated as she was to the art of the garden.

Not long after Farrand’s marriage at the age of 41, her divorced mother gave her the six-acre Reef Point house and garden. She and her husband regularly spent long summers there, steadily improving a naturalistic garden, and as their professional careers neared an end they collaborated on turning the property into a center for the study of the artistic use of plants, to be useful “to all who are interested in outdoor beauty.” When Max Farrand died in 1945, his widow carried on with plant labeling, house remodeling, and other preparations. The garden was open from early morning to dusk, and many visitors came—over 2,000 in 1945. Among the large and varied botanical collection, there were approximately 250 azaleas, planted in groups that are identified by color on site maps. Farrand had turned to her friends at the Arnold Arboretum for help in accurately identifying everything.

By 1955, it became clear that the project had to be abandoned. She could not afford it. A critical event was a catastrophic fire that ravaged Mount Desert Island in the fall of 1947. Though Reef Point itself was spared, many very valuable houses of very rich summer residents were wiped out, and with them much of Bar Harbor’s tax base. Farrand was unable to get a tax exemption for her property. Also, federal government taxes, not a consideration when planning for the project began, had become one. And tourists’ tastes appeared to be changing. In a deeply felt letter to friends and supporters of the project, she began by recalling that the world was different when she and her husband had begun planning in the 1930s, “before the second great war [and] life was keyed in another and quieter note.”

It was now better to dissolve everything than to face deterioration of the garden. She sold the property and the house was demolished, but the plants were saved by the vision, energy, and executive ability of Savage, then 52 years old, who was running the Asticou Inn, his family’s hotel property in Northeast Harbor.

Savage had the daring idea that he could transplant much of Farrand’s garden to a four-acre alder swamp across the road from his hotel, which was several miles from Reef Point. More than that, he had the imagination to conceive of using her plants and the rocks and pines of the island to create a Japanese stroll garden. He had not really intended to be a hotel owner. He was planning to study architecture at MIT, but the premature death of his father diverted him. There was experience with architecture and construction in his family, the summer residents were a source of instruction, and he had read books about the Japanese gardens of Kyoto. He visited Japanese gardens at various sites in the United States, such as the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. He had a lot of good help from expert crew members on the island, who were able to dig plants with big root balls and wrap them in burlap. Big flatbed trucks were brought in from Boston to haul some of the largest tree specimens. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., often a generous benefactor when the island environment was at stake, gave money. Rockefeller and his late wife, Abby Aldrich, were good friends of Farrand. She instrumental in creating Mrs. Rockefeller’s garden and helped Mr. Rockefeller with the landscaping of carriage roads and bridges that he had built.

Incredibly, the new garden was ready to receive visitors in two years. Farrand was chauffeured to the site every two weeks or so to watch its progress. She was now more than 80. In June 1956, Savage received from her a typed note thanking him “most gratefully for all your interest, your care and your friendship.” In a firm hand, she added, “It is a comfort to know that the plants from R. P. will continue their lives with you.”

Taking azaleas as my subject, I have neglected to note Farrand’s passion for other plants and for plant families. She conceived of the azalea border as a collection of Ericaceae, and opened it with a bed of heaths. “The heaths belong to a beautiful family; it is hard to think of a single member that has not some special distinction and elegance . . .” There were many heaths and also heathers, which are technically of different genera, at Reef Point, lending an undulating softness to the landscape. She loved roses, both climbers and single

roses. A cascade of forsythias along a set of steps is a memorable feature of spring at Dumbarton Oaks. The Arnold Arboretum would introduce a forsythia cultivar that bears her name. Her love of horticulture, along with her gift for design and an intense commitment to her profession, was critical to the success of her career. Her visitor's guide to the Reef Point garden, published in 1950 and sold to visitors for ten cents, reads like a botanic encyclopedia.

Plants from Reef Point came not just to Asticou, but also to its near neighbor Thuya, whose garden features perennial beds as well as some of the evergreen specimens that were saved. On an elevated site above Asticou, Thuya became a temporary winter resting place for plants excavated from Reef Point. After the installations at Asticou had reached a satisfactory state, Savage turned to work on Thuya. Thuya and the granite steps and lookouts over Northeast Harbor that lead up to it, which are called the Asticou Terraces, had begun as the project of a landscape designer and civil engineer from Boston, Joseph Curtis, who was a summer resident. After Curtis died in 1928, Savage had been appointed by town officials to succeed him as the sole trustee of the Asticou Terraces. Thus, he was in a position to create not just one beautiful garden with Farrand's plants, but two. Azalea lovers who visit Asticou should be sure to visit Thuya as well.

Less obviously, and even more poignantly, a third garden was made of material transplanted from Reef Point. Here the designer was Farrand herself, and the planted area was less than a tenth of an acre. After the large house at Reef Point was demolished, Farrand and her architect, Robert W. Patterson, collaborated in creating a modest dwelling for her remaining life. This took the form of a wing added to a farm house that was

owned by Lewis and Amy Garland, whom Farrand had employed, Mr. Garland as a chauffeur and handyman, Mrs. Garland as a horticulturist. The house was Lewis Garland's ancestral home, located on 100 acres several miles north of Bar Harbor in an area with the evocative name of Eden. Farrand brought many of her favorite plants, including of course azaleas, to the new location, and surrounded herself, a personal caretaker, and the Garlands with them. Garland Farm, reduced from 100 acres to a little less than five, is today owned by the Beatrix Farrand Society, which was formed in 2003 "to foster the art and science of horticulture and landscape design" with emphasis on her life and work. A major project of the Society has been to restore the terrace gardens that Farrand and her caretaker could access from their apartments through French doors. A study/sitting room situated between the apartments overlooks beds of heaths and heathers interplanted with lavender.

The Asticou Azalea Garden, tucked away improbably on a tip of Mount Desert Island in Maine, richly deserves the attention of azalea lovers, and a welcome step in that direction took place at the annual meeting of the Azalea Society of America in Charleston in 2014, at which Mary Roper, Asticou's manager, gave a well-received talk. For information about the azaleas in the garden, see <http://www.gardenpreserve.org/asticou-azalea-garden/plant-list.html>

For information on Garland Farm, which has visiting hours during the summer, see [www.beatrixfarrandsociety.org](http://www.beatrixfarrandsociety.org).

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