



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

The view from inside the entrance to the Walled Garden

Untermyer brightens annual holiday landscape

By Jackie Lupu

YONKERS — The fans of Untermyer Park and Gardens in Yonkers keep multiplying as its meticulous restoration, now in its sixth year, moves forward. Proof that those fans are a loyal bunch was the number of people — more than 650, by the count of Untermyer Gardens Conservancy president Stephen Byrns — who turned out despite the frigid temperatures last Friday, Dec. 9, for the opening of the “Grand Holiday Illumination.”

To the strains of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Zoroastrian music, guests walked along the dark garden paths, which were illuminated by

strips of light. Those hardy souls were joined by City of Yonkers officials as they awaited the “big reveal”: the flip of the switches that turned on 81,000 colored lights, outlining the Indo-Persian-inspired Walled Garden’s remarkable architecture, monuments, and trees.

Former Mayor Angelo Martinelli, who donated funds to renovate the Garden’s Temple of Love in memory of his wife, Carol, presided over the illumination, which revealed sections of the site one at a time, each greeted with collective gasps from the bundled-up attendees. The Gardens are the property of the City of Yonkers, and their restoration and upkeep are made possible by a public-private

partnership between the City and the Conservancy, a not-for-profit organization supported by assorted donors, from local residents to benefactors from the worlds of New York design and horticulture.

This, the second annual illumination, featured double the number of lights as last year. The lights will shine from dusk to 8 p.m. every evening through Jan. 8. “The illumination is the Gardens’ gift to the City,” said Byrns, who reminded the guests that the attraction was “the only great garden in America open free of charge to the public.”

For each night of the illumination, there will be multicultural holiday music piped throughout the gardens

over loudspeakers, and volunteers from local organizations will be on hand with free cups of hot chocolate.

The lights may be the most colorful feature of the property as winter closes in, but for the Conservancy’s gardeners, the work continues indoors. Earlier this fall, 10,000 tulip bulbs were planted. Each year since the Walled Garden was restored, a new batch of bulbs has been put in the ground, each time with a different color scheme. For 2017, “It will be a surprise,” Byrns told the Enterprise on Dec. 13. In the meantime, at greenhouses near the Hudson River Museum, seedlings for the annual plants

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Untermyer

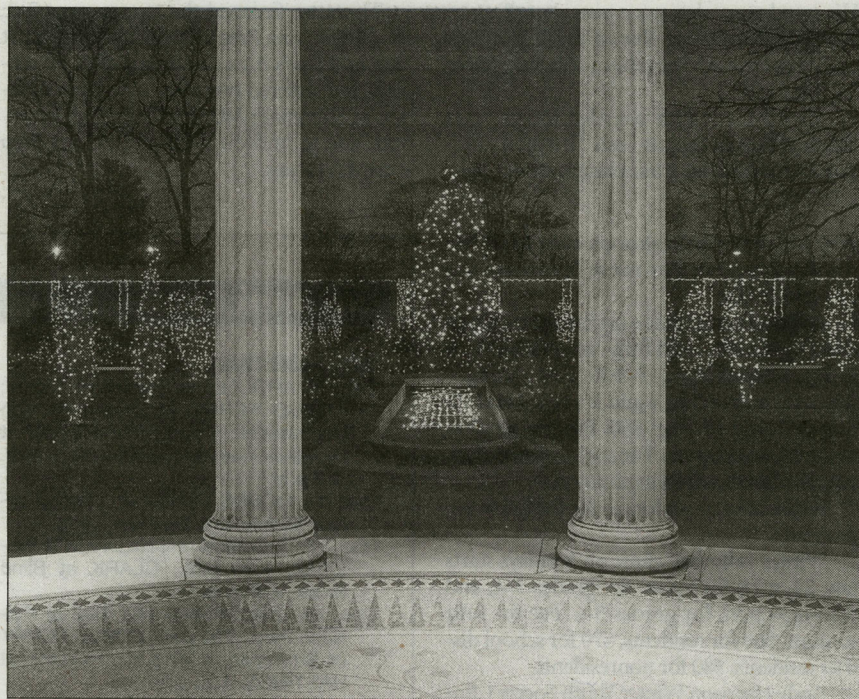
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that will line the canals, following the springtime explosion of colored bulbs, will be cultivated indoors.

“The irony was that Samuel Untermyer [the previous owner of the property, who died in 1940] had 60 greenhouses,” Byrns said. Some of those were located across Broadway, where Untermyer’s property used to continue, but is now occupied by a medical building and apartments. Other greenhouses were on land now owned by St. John’s Riverside Hospital.

Byrns said that the staff has planned major new planting around the Temple of Love. Plenty of flowering plants were installed this summer, in time for another grand ceremony in October at the gardens: the rededication of the Temple of Love. That monument is a classical folly with a wrought-iron dome, set upon a pedestal of rough-hewn boulders punctuated by cascading waterfalls and plantings. It had fallen into serious disrepair over the decades since Untermyer’s passing, and last year the Conservancy oversaw its restoration, including refurbishing the dome, replacing the masonry, and rejuvenating the waterworks.

Byrns, who has a knack for finding occasions to celebrate and a talent for collecting friends of the Gardens to celebrate with, plans another ceremony next



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The view from the Temple of the Sky

spring: the dedication of “The Vista.” This set of stone stairs processing down toward the Hudson was conceived by the landscape’s original designers as a tribute to the stairs at the Villa d’Este on Lake Como, Italy, but instead of a lake view, visitors enjoy the river and Palisades, framed by a pair of ancient Roman columns brought from Europe

by boat 100 years ago. The stairway and the trees and flowers lining both sides of it have been rejuvenated and replanted, ready for their debut.

The back (western) entrance to the Gardens, via Warburton Avenue, is also being brought back into shape. Earlier this year, the original gatehouse, which was crumbling, was shored up. Byrns’

vision of the gatehouse is for a “picturesque ruin,” similar to ruins intentionally erected in old European gardens. That means the un-picturesque graffiti will be removed, and security lights and cameras will be added to prevent the structure from reverting to a teenage hangout, a fate that befell many of the property’s monuments before the gardens’ restoration.

Near the gatehouse, where twin statues guard the entrance, the missing head of one of those sculptures will be restored. Byrns said research revealed that the creature is a unicorn, not a horse as previously thought. About five years from now, Byrns added, the Conservancy hopes to install a “rhododendron walk” to guide visitors from Warburton Avenue up to the gatehouse, which is off the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail.

In late 2017, the Conservancy will repair the plumbing in the canals of the Walled Garden. Repairs may also begin to the Temple of the Sky, a circular, columned classical temple with no roof, and featuring a complex mosaic floor depicting the head of Medusa. Currently, an unstable section of the temple is being held up by an unattractive, but functional buttress.

Byrns’ wish list culminates in what he calls “the kingpin” of all the rebuilding projects: the rejuvenation of the huge mosaic swimming pool, which includes tiled illustrations of sea creatures that must be restored. That project would, funds permitting, get underway in 2019.