Heritage in the Landscape
Adapting to Maintain a Timeless Garden at Filoli

KARA NEWPORT

A historic landscape tells the story of a place dynamically—it will not allow for a static tale. Landscapes are living, and thus they evolve through the intentions of the people who carve them from the land; through interaction with the environment, both natural and designed; and through the influence of those who continue to use, maintain, and enjoy them over time. These times of rapid evolution—hastened by factors such as climate change—require both careful evaluation and decisive action from the stewards of historic landscapes such as the one at Filoli, a historic house and garden in Woodside, California.

THE CREATION OF FILOLI’S GARDEN
Filoli was built for Mr. and Mrs. William Bowers Bourn II, prominent San Franciscans whose chief source of wealth was the Empire Gold Mine in Grass Valley, California—though Mr. Bourn was also owner and president of the Spring Valley Water Company. Construction

Mr. Bourn chose the unusual name of Filoli by combining the first two letters from the keywords of his credo: Fight for a just cause, Love your fellow man, Live a good life.

CREDIT: FILOLI
of Filoli began in 1915. Bruce Porter, a talented stained-glass artist, painter, muralist, landscape designer, and art critic, was enlisted to help the Bourns plan the layout of the extensive formal garden, which was built between 1917 and 1929.

Many artists, all working to fulfill Bourn’s vision, collaborated to create the garden. Along with the rest of the house, Willis Polk designed the terraces, but much of the final garden structural hardscape was architect Arthur Brown’s vision. Porter then created the more intimate garden rooms, with designer Isabella Worn choosing many of the plants to fill these spaces.

Mr. and Mrs. William P. Roth, owners of the Matson Navigation Company, purchased the estate in 1937. Under the Roths’ supervision and maintenance, the formal garden gained worldwide recognition. Through a shared vision, Mrs. Roth and a team of international gardening staff stewarded the estate, continuing to build on its remarkable footprint.

Mrs. Roth made Filoli her home until 1975 when she donated 125 acres, including the house and formal garden, to the National Trust for Historic Preservation for the enjoyment and inspiration of others.

A key historic viewshed is over the Sunken Garden into the Santa Cruz mountains shown here with a temporary modern sculpture exhibition.

PHOTO BY JIM ALLEN
future generations. The remaining acreage was later gifted to the nonprofit Filoli Center, which ensured the preservation of the critical viewshed.

Today Filoli is known for an awe-inspiring garden that attracts more than 200,000 guests each year. Large, old coast live and valley oaks surround the house. Sixteen acres of formal gardens are divided into a number of separate rooms and spaces that feature daffodil fields, fruit orchards, perennial border, flower beds edged in boxwood parterres, lawns, tall hedges, and specimen trees and shrubs. Camellias, rhododendrons, magnolias, Irish yews, olive trees, and other rare and unusual plants can be found throughout the garden.

The garden has always had an artistic flair, and it contains many art objects. Elaborate custom-created reliefs adorn the Garden House: plaques, cast stone bouquets, and ornate gates combine to create a “Secret Garden” feel. These original pieces are considered part of the National Trust’s collection, and Filoli staff work to preserve the aging, weather-worn artifacts while maintaining them as integral pieces of the garden experience.

DETERMINING AND MAINTAINING INTEGRITY

One of the challenges of historic landscape management is striking a balance between retaining original plants and preserving landscape intent.

Preserving the garden remains a driving force behind the horticulture at Filoli; maintaining traditions ensures that the site continues to reflect its early-20th-century roots. The layout and structure of the garden—its hedged rooms, garden walls, and designated paths and beds—has remained largely unchanged over 100 years. Plantings occur within the framework of these intricate bones. The 1920s greenhouses still display the original tropical plants and produce the seed-grown bedding plants used for the seasonal plantings. Continuing to propagate “historic” plants—like boxwood, yews, and wisteria—allows us to preserve their original genetic material.

Nonetheless, we have to make adaptations and choices. Several of the historic plants and trees have far exceeded their originally intended sizes. They now block walkways, their roots
causing the brick paths to heave and obscuring intended viewsheds. Thus, we are forced to balance preserving germplasm through propagation with carefully removing and replacing the original plants when necessary.

Thanks in part to having had only two prior owners, both of whom held substantial documented history, Filoli has amassed a large collection of photographs that help us maintain the intended integrity of the estate. We use these images to identify particular specimens from the Bourn era, track significant plant changes, and reference details such as preferred hedge height. The more than one mile of groomed hedges, for example, requires constant maintenance and systematic reductions in size to maintain its form. Photo documentation indicates that both the Bourn and Roth families faced the same challenges of maintaining the dynamic landscape over time: the same hedge sometimes grew to knee height and sometimes overspilled the walkway.

Stewards of Filoli have also been cataloging the plant collection since the 1970s, and we recently dramatically improved our plant collection system. Not only did we upgrade the database but we also developed a specific bed-tracking system that allows us to note plant locations on a map. This information will soon be available to the public, enabling visitors with a special interest in horticulture to better identify and appreciate the plantings.

NEW AND EXPANDED LANDSCAPE USE

While maintaining integrity guides our preservation choices, the intended purpose of a living landscape may change over time. For generations, the families that owned Filoli used the garden to play tennis on the courts, picnic and play games on the lawns, swim in the pool, and hold outdoor events and parties. But, of course, they didn’t host hundreds of thousands of people a year, as we do now, and experience the corresponding strain on the landscape.
On the other hand, presenting the garden as a static place that does not allow some level of use would dramatically limit our ability to vividly tell its stories. There must be a balance between protecting the resources of the landscape and allowing visitors to develop a greater understanding of the space by interacting and connecting with it. Filoli has created property-use guidelines that allow access while limiting damage. For staff, volunteers, and those who rent the garden for events, these guidelines are the basis for managing visitor access.

One of the parts of the garden that has become increasingly accessible in modern times is its lawns. While the carefully maintained lawns were an important element of the garden’s initial design—and while they enhance its viewsheds—they are also replaceable. In a region where fewer and fewer children have yards, it is delightful to see kids playing old-fashioned games like badminton. We have even integrated a game of croquet into the interpretative story for school programs, allowing students to play just as the Bourn grandchildren did nearly a century ago.

**FILOLI’S VIEWSHEDS AND THE HIGH PLACE RESTORATION**

Viewsheds are critical to creating a sense of place. How a space is meant to be experienced against a distant backdrop is an important part of the overall design intention. The views are one of the remarkable features that create a magical experience at Filoli. As they meander down the intricate paths enclosed in walls and
hedges, visitors might turn a corner to reveal a dramatic view that allows them to imagine living on the estate 100 years ago, far from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Filoli is fortunate to have been gifted surrounding land, which has allowed the original views to survive. Maintaining them is plenty of work nonetheless. Filoli is developing a mechanism for documenting our vistas and viewsheds to ensure their long-term preservation. Staff will be able to use this documentation to develop necessary amenities such as restrooms or visitor centers without compromising the important sense of place.

The High Place, constructed in the 1920s at the far end of the garden, was noted as Mr. Bourn’s favorite area in part for its view; from there, he could see the entire estate as well as Crystal Springs Lake. It is also an outdoor amphitheater with an upper and lower lawn terrace enclosed by hedges, trees, and an Irish yew backdrop. When initially constructed, the site had the further drama of a line of Lombardy poplars behind the Irish yew to help it stand out from anywhere else on the estate.

The High Place has lost its original detail and suffers from issues of declining plant health. The main goal of the ongoing restoration project is to improve the site’s growing conditions and return it to its original design, including restoring plants that were lost as the landscape grew and was modified due to other priorities.

To return the High Place to its original grandeur, we will need to undertake several major projects. Removing a number of forest trees will provide the area with adequate light for plant health and
design integrity. Replacing the Lombardy Poplars will create the grand end cap for the formal garden. Grading will help slope land away from the Irish yews and wisteria, to create optimal growing conditions. Pruning the original Irish yews heavily will reduce their size and their proportion in relation to other landscape features. Reconfiguring the irrigation system will enhance soil moisture conditions. Replanting the former lawn terraces—which we recently mulched during a series of drought years—with a turf blend that we identified through trials will leave the lawn better suited for high traffic, drought tolerance, and cool seasons.

Such a restoration project provides a perfect opportunity to integrate modern conveniences to best engage the visiting public. To focus foot traffic and reduce lawn compaction, we will add a gravel path to join the High Place to two adjacent path systems. Installing landscape and pathway lighting will provide better accessibility and facilitate use of the site for planned programs and other revenue-earning functions.

ADDRESSING CLIMATE CHANGE AND OTHER MODERN CHALLENGES

In the drought-ridden western United States, climate change is causing shorter, dryer winters; more frequent fires; and shrinking water resources. Filoli’s formal garden design did not consider limitations on water availability, and the exotic cultivars could not survive the harsh California summers without ample water resources.

Filoli’s first nod toward being more water conscious came after a series of significant droughts in the 1970s and ‘80s. Over the next decade, Filoli staff installed a complete irrigation system designed to distribute exactly the amount of moisture that different plants—trees and shrubs, annual beds, turfgrasses—need. Since then, we have made further strides to prevent the overuse of water. Our irrigation schedules are based on the California Irrigation Management Information System, which uses historic weather data to recommend a precise volume of water that keeps our plants thriving without waste.

While restoring the orchard, we installed water-saving micro-sprinkler technologies. We have also integrated new MP Rotator
sprinklers to increase irrigation efficiency in the formal garden. We expanded our visitor center in 2005, and since it is not in a historic area, we chose to enhance the California native landscape surrounding the building. We opted for beautiful, drought-tolerant plants instead of the more water-dependent varieties found in the formal garden.

After back-to-back drought years in 2014–15, Filoli embarked on a trial to determine whether there were varieties of drought-tolerant turfgrass that would work well in our specific micro-climate, match the aesthetic of the garden, and require less irrigation. In all, we tested 12 varieties before settling on the No Mow Fescue from Prairie Nursery. This variety requires 40 percent less water, needs mowing only once or twice a month, and works well in the setting of our somewhat less formal yew allée.

The impacts of climate change extend beyond just drought and watering concerns. We have experienced increases in plant diseases that are likely linked to warmer conditions, such as bacterial blights and root disease fungi. Warmer winters have also affected budding and bloom times. Filoli is renowned for our bulb display, and each year the season begins earlier and earlier; we are now forced to encourage guests to come in January and February for traditionally “spring” displays.

One of the most important resources in the battle against these changing conditions is a highly qualified horticulture staff.
Just as in the days of the Bourn and Roth families, the staff are central in the story of the garden. They are the first line in creating efficiencies in water use, identifying disease, and exploring new techniques for modern applications.

Filoli strives to serve as both a national example in garden preservation and use and a place of beauty and respite for all who visit. An entrepreneur and an innovator, Mr. Bourn would have embraced the modern tools and techniques that set Filoli apart as a leader. FJ

KARA NEWPORT, who has a considerable background in public garden management, has been the chief executive officer of Filoli since 2016.

TAKEAWAY

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