

Newton's Secret Garden

On Tuesday, January 10, an audience of more than one hundred people learned about a hidden treasure when they attended a program at the library: Discovering Houghton, Views of Newton's Secret Garden, sponsored by the Newton Free Library, Newton Conservators, Friends of the Houghton Garden, and the new Amherst-College-based literary magazine, *The Common*.

It was an interesting evening filled with discussion of past history, landscape design, and photographic excellence combined with literary commentary—a little something for everyone. As head of the Friends of Houghton Garden, I gave an overview of the acquisition and renovation of the garden. Jane Roy Brown of the Library of American Landscape History provided the historical context for the garden's design. Finally, Sarah Luria, Professor of English at Holy Cross, shared her reflections on looking at the garden through the work of contemporary photographer Daniel Jackson. (Sarah Luria and Daniel Jackson collaborated on a photo essay published in the second issue of *The Common*.)

If you were unable to hear the lecture, let me walk you through a bit of my presentation. Houghton Garden is located at the intersection of Suffolk and Woodman Road, behind the Church of the Redeemer in the Chestnut Hill area. Created in 1906 by Martha and Clement Houghton on 26 acres, which included the house, carriage house, green houses and other sundry maintenance structures, the garden was designed to take advantage of the natural contours of the landscape. With assistance from the landscape architect Warren Manning, the existing waterways were reconfigured to form a peninsula and a disguised water moraine that would bring the desirable growing conditions sought by gardeners, moist but well-drained soil. One side was prepared for acid-loving plants and the other for lime-loving plants. That manipulation would be unthinkable today with the statewide wetlands restrictions.

Martha Houghton traveled to England frequently and to Japan several times to collect plant material that could be



Photo: Daniel Jackson, <http://straightphotography.org/galleries/houghton>

NewtonSERVES

Help us help Newton on Sunday, April 29!

Saw Mill Park Garlic Mustard Pull — 10:00am

Trip Leader is Katherine Howard (617-527-1796)

Blue Heron Bridge Garlic Mustard Pull — 10:00am

Trip leader is Eric Olson (617-872-9928)

Dolan Pond Garlic Mustard Pull — 10:00am

Trip Leader is Eric Olson (617-872-9928)

Nahonton Park Invasive Pull — 10:00am

Trip Leader: Jane Sender (617-462-8425)

To work on one of the projects listed, please send a message to NewtonSERVES@newtoncommunitypride.org or call 617-527-8283.

used in her “wild garden.” There is even a letter from the famous landscape architect Fletcher Steele to the United States Department of Agriculture vouching for Mrs. Houghton's plants being allowed to pass by quarantine in the hopes of surviving their travels. Dwarf conifers, exotic bulbs, every known species of rhododendron hardy enough for her location, alpine flowers, water-type plants to suit conditions, and hundreds of primulas were a few of what she brought. In its day, the Houghton Garden provided a pleasurable experience for the knowledgeable who could admire her intelligent selections and skill at cultivating difficult plants and for the less informed visitor who simply recognized the beauty, the color, the perfume of the garden.

Numerous national accolades came to the garden and its owners, and in 1934 Martha became one of the founders of the American Rock Garden Society and its president from 1936-1940. Unfortunately, times change. Martha died in 1956, and in 1968 the city of Newton acquired the land by eminent domain as part of acreage taken from the Webster Trustees. This Webster Conservation Land was the first acquisition of the Newton Conservation Commission, established the same year. Since 1975, when the Chestnut Hill Garden Club signed a maintenance agreement with the Conservation Commission, the club as well as the Friends, who formed in 2003, have worked together to aid in the upkeep of the garden. In 1999, the Houghton Garden was added to the Register of Historic Places, and photographs of it as well as other documents now reside at the Smithsonian and at the Arnold Arboretum.

The Friends are very grateful for the support we get from the Conservators, which enables us to collect funds as a non-profit, and for all the hard work President Jane Sender has given us in recent years during her tenure on the Conservation Commission. Through our combined efforts, we remain the stewards of this historic gem in Newton.

Come by for a stroll or if you can, join us for our park clean-ups that we hold several times a year. The muscles may get sore, but lunch is on me!

Photo: Michele Hanss, Head of the Friends of the Houghton Garden