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NEWSLETTER

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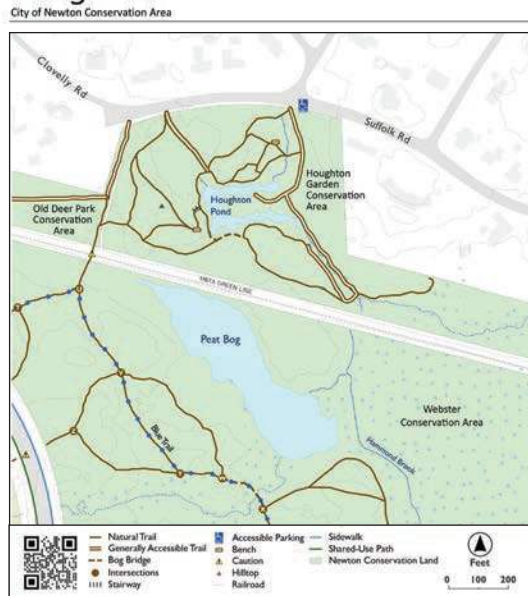
Houghton Garden: A Landscape Treasure

By Richard B. Primack and Michele Hanss



Martha Houghton in a view of Houghton Garden at its peak of development (Friends of Houghton Garden)

Houghton Garden Conservation Area



GRAPHIC: COURTESY JENNIFER STEEL

The Houghton Garden is an easily overlooked landscape treasure in the midst of Chestnut Hill. The garden was once recognized as one of the most outstanding private gardens in the country. Its network of trails, groupings of evergreen plants, streams, and pond still create a magical environment in every season, unlike anywhere else publicly available in Newton.

Houghton Garden is on Suffolk Road, surrounded by a tall picket fence with several gates. To the south, T-tracks separate it from the Webster and Hammond Woods. The 10-acre property is crossed by Hammond Brook coming in from the south and the smaller Woodman Stream coming in from the north. Both streams curve west to create a small peninsula and merge to form Houghton Pond. Water spills over a dam at the pond

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outlet and under a stone bridge before disappearing into a culvert.



PHOTO: DAN BRODY

Flowering shrubs add color on the edge of Houghton Pond.



PHOTO: RICHARD PRIMACK

Umbrella pine tree growing above the rock garden



PHOTO: RICHARD PRIMACK

Umbrella pine closeup

A small hill above the pond's west side, with abundant evergreen rhododendron shrubs on its slope, provides tranquil views of the pond. On the northern bank is an open area for perennial plants dominated by a large Japanese umbrella pine and other unusual evergreen trees and shrubs, including dwarf conifers.

Martha and Clement Houghton

The current Houghton Garden is part of a 26-acre parcel purchased in 1901 by Martha and Clement Houghton, who lived in the Spanish-style mansion nearby. An enthusiastic gardener, Martha often traveled to England and Japan to learn about landscape design and gardening and to purchase plants.

Martha's particular passion was alpine and

rock garden plants, and she followed the ideas of Reginald Farrer, as described in his book *The English Rock Garden*.

To achieve her vision, noted landscape designer Warren Manning helped design the water features. Hammond Brook was diverted to its present course by a cement dam, and a new stream bed and pond basin were built.

The land surfaces were reshaped to create a variety of slopes, exposed rock features, and open vistas suitable for growing flowering plants and ferns.

Tall, shady trees were replaced with smaller birches and dogwoods to allow for more light. Most notably, rock garden beds were built with various combinations of soil and crushed stone to create specialized conditions for different alpine and rock garden plants, with an underlying system of pipes for watering during dry weather and draining during rainy weather. Ferns and wildflowers, especially primulas, were planted in abundance throughout the garden to create masses of blooms and a succession of flowers in each season.

All this was made possible by the Houghton family's wealth, a large crew of gardeners, the advice of leading experts, and the expertise, energy, and enthusiasm of Martha Houghton herself, one of the founding members and President of the American Rock Garden Society.

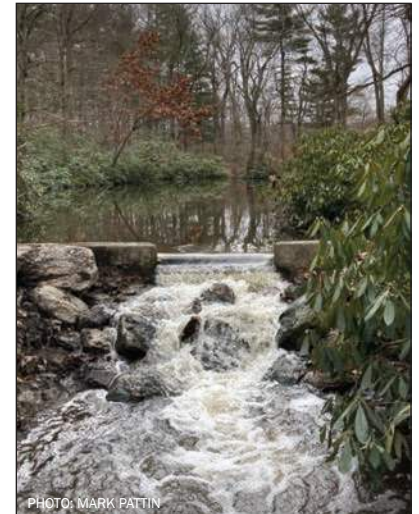


PHOTO: MARK PATTIN

The stream varies greatly in intensity over the dam.



PHOTO: DAN BRODY

Azalea flowers frame the pond.

The garden's outstanding characteristics were officially recognized by a 1929 silver medal award from the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, stating, "The charm of

these delightful gardens lies in the expert use of natural plant growth and rock formations already existing on the grounds. Furthermore, one is impressed with the idea that plants are in the place intended for them." The beauty of the garden was also documented by the eminent landscape photographer Herbert Gleason.

Acquisition by the city

At its peak, Houghton Garden was one of the most outstanding gardens in the United States. However, as the Houghtons aged and finally passed away (Clement in 1949 and Martha in 1956), the garden entered a period of decline and neglect. Without maintenance, the paths and waterways deteriorated, and the flowers gradually declined. The garden became an overgrown, inaccessible woodland full of oversized, fallen, and dead trees.



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY
A small bridge helps visitors cross a stream.

the pathways accessible, rebuild the dam and bridges, clear away fallen trees, hydro-rake the streams and pond, cut back overgrown shrubs, and thin the tree canopy. The Chestnut Hill Garden Club planted numerous flowering plants in the former rock garden beds. The city also installed fencing and gates to regulate movement in and out of the garden. The total cost was over \$230,000, which came from a wide variety of sources, including the City and neighborhood organizations. Once restored, Houghton Garden was opened to the public.



PHOTO: RICHARD PRIMACK
A bald cypress tree stands on the edge of the pond.

Under threat of development in 1968 as a new campus for the Massachusetts College of Art, residents and the City of Newton acted to preserve this treasure. After a prolonged legal battle, and with many allies across Newton, the city took the land by eminent domain. The city, nonprofits, and volunteers did a huge amount of work to repair and make

The Garden Club produced a trail guide in 1997, which included the results of a detailed plant survey. Although most of the perennial wildflowers had been lost, numerous woody plants survived, including notable native

plants such as sourwood, tulip tree, and sweet bay magnolia, and Asian plants such as Sawara false cypress, cork tree, and katsura tree. One of the most unusual plants in the garden is the tall bald cypress tree growing at the end of the peninsula next to the pond, with its “knee” roots poking above the ground.

Houghton Garden today and tomorrow

Walking in Houghton Garden provides a beautiful and tranquil experience for the busy residents of Newton and students from nearby schools. Houghton Garden has a fully accessible stone dust pathway that leads from the main gate on Suffolk Road to the stone bridge over Hammond Brook.



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY
Hydro-raking of the pond is part of the needed maintenance.

Maintaining the garden is an ongoing activity for the Friends of Houghton Garden and the Newton Conservation Commission. The biggest challenge is removing dead and

fallen trees, an increasing problem as hemlocks and other species succumb to introduced insects and other pests. The pond was recently hydro-raked to remove a century of accumulated organic material. The raked organic material was used to regrade and restore with native trees and shrubs a large corner of the garden overrun by invasive buckthorn. There are also “people problems” like dog walkers with off-leash pets, misguided artists painting graffiti on rocks, and student groups holding drinking parties. For these problems, it is the vigilance and responsibility of local neighbors that protect the garden.

In coming years, the garden will continue to improve through plantings of more native plants, particularly those selected for drought resistance. The current value of the garden is encapsulated in the 1997 trail guide: “The creation of this wild garden has proven a great legacy of the Houghtons’ lifelong passion for gardening. While the formal gardens... have all but disappeared, in the turn of a shady path and the opening of a vista, the public can still experience the Houghtons’ guiding hand and inspired composition.”

Richard is a lifelong Newton resident and a Professor at Boston University. Michele is Head of the Friends of the Houghton Garden and the Park Steward for over 20 years. ♦