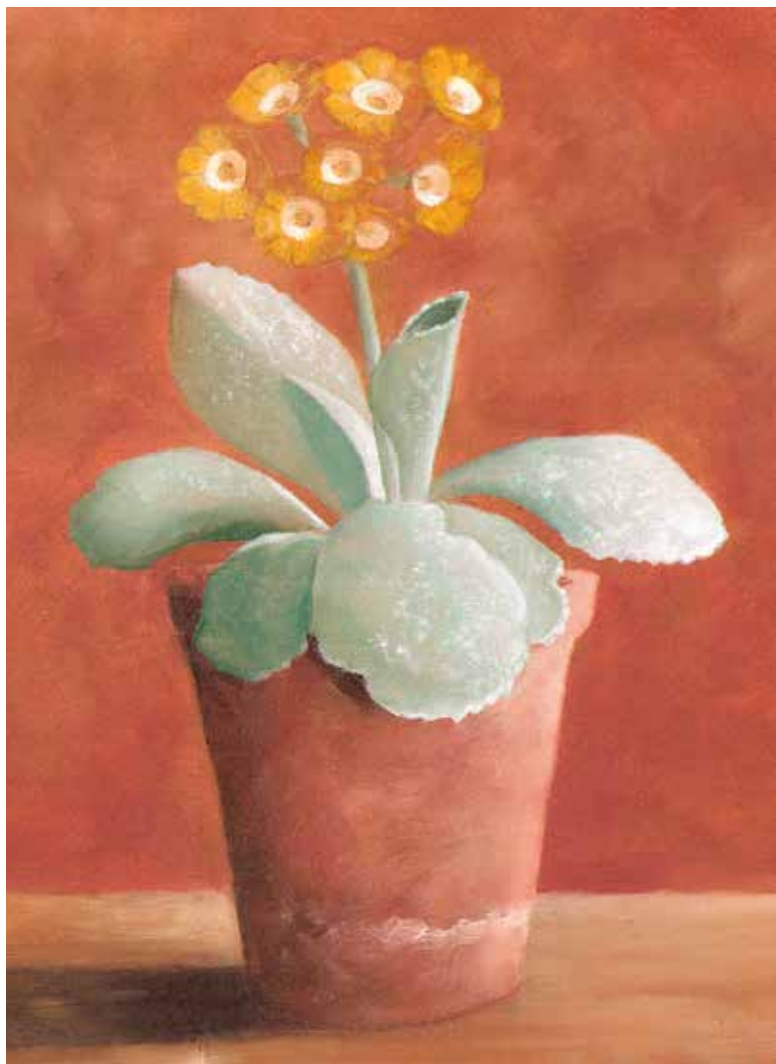


HORTUS

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Stonecrop Gardens, Cold Spring, New York

PART ONE: SPRING

CAROLINE BURGESS



Stonecrop Gardens in Cold Spring occupies a rocky hilltop eleven hundred feet above sea level in the Hudson River's picturesque highlands, an hour's drive north of New York City. Now a public garden, it began life in 1958 as a country retreat when Frank and Anne Cabot built a house and started to garden.

Always magical, Stonecrop began as something of an alchemical marriage. The land, with its dramatic topography, thick woodlands and open pastures with striking views of distant mountains was a gift from Anne's grandmother, Evelina Perkins. It was a forty-acre inholding at Glynwood, the Perkins family's three-thousand-acre farm. Its architecture – from the house to the potting- and tool-sheds – was carefully derived from the vernacular architecture

of Quebec's Charlevoix region, a nod to the Cabot compound at La Malbaie, on the St Lawrence River. Above the Hudson a new family place was forged where Frank, Anne, their three children, Colin, Currie and Marianne, as well as generations of friends and relations, enjoyed the idyllic pleasures of country life. For the senior Cabots, such pleasures included gardening, particularly with alpine.

Stonecrop began with Anne. Inspired by her family's rock garden next door, she set out to create her own. Wherever she dug, she struck rock, and with more than a dash of irony, Stonecrop was born. Her alpine fever eventually infected Frank, initiating a long gardening life together. By bringing my own influences and ideas to the mix, I too joined the Stonecrop family in an almost accidental fashion.

In the midst of obtaining my Kew Diploma in Horticulture, I hoped to win an award supporting relevant travel and study. My first step was to seek advice from my mentor, Rosemary Verey. (My relationship with her dates from when I was thirteen, and began riding one of her ponies. A few weeks later I started to work for her in the garden at Barnsley House and continued during afternoons and weekends throughout my school years. Eventually, I became Rosemary's head gardener, a post I held for four years before studying at Kew.) When I called, Rosemary had just returned from the United States and was enchanted with a garden in New York City called Wave Hill. I wrote directly, asking if I could come to garden for them, gratis. As the award deadline drew nearer, and no response materialised, I called Rosemary again. She remembered meeting a man at her Wave Hill lecture who seemed to have 'connections' there, and suggested I call him for help. In ignorant bliss, I went off to a phone box with a handful of change and proceeded to call America, asking for someone whose name Rosemary had pronounced Cabeau. When he eventually came to the phone – my supply of coins dwindling – he dryly told me that in the United States the family name Cabot was pronounced with a hard 't'. He listened carefully to my story, and then said that he and his wife had a garden a bit further north in New York State. If I could work for them for six weeks, they would pay my airfare and provide me with

room and board. I later learnt that everything about the exchange was quintessential Frank. It took a bit of arranging to get away from Kew for that long, but all fell into place. By the end of my stay with the Cabots, it was settled that I would return to become the manager at Stonecrop in another year or so after I received my diploma. As it turned out, someone else received the long-ago Kew award, but in that phone box I launched an odyssey now thirty years in the making.

In addition to creating a place of singular beauty, the Cabots' goal at Stonecrop had long been to inspire fellow gardeners. Idealistic, energetic, and in possession of what could be termed a Classical education as a professional gardener, I was likewise eager that this endeavour would be more than the sum of its parts. I arrived for good in 1984. Existing garden areas were enhanced, new garden areas developed, and plans made for the future. Stonecrop Gardens, a fledgling not-for-profit enterprise, was opened to the public in 1992. Our small school of practical horticulture quickly followed, offering intensive one- and two-year internships for professionals as well as short courses for the general public. Stonecrop's official opening wasn't long after Frank Cabot founded the Garden Conservancy, a charitable organisation dedicated to preserving 'American gardens for the education and enjoyment of the public'. In many ways, both ventures developed in tandem.

Today Stonecrop consists of twelve acres of display gardens surrounded by more than fifty acres of fields and woodland. The plant collection is as diverse as the gardens themselves. There are woodland and water gardens, a grass garden, raised alpine stone beds, a cliff rock garden, a systematic order bed and an enclosed flower garden prominently featuring half-hardy and tropical plants. A conservatory and numerous speciality display houses showcase further horticultural rarities. In limited quantities, selected species from the gardens are offered to the public in the form of collected seeds and propagated plants. It is as we all had hoped, a garden for plant enthusiasts.

Spring

When I first took up my post in Cold Spring, I was accustomed to hard work and ready – with the fervour of youth – for my greatest challenge yet. I was not expecting that to be the extremes of climate and the windswept location itself. All these years later I still find that, for me, spring at Stonecrop is about searching for old friends in the garden, looking to see just what has survived the long winter.

The season essentially begins when the garden opens to the public on 1 April. This is not to say that winter is over, or that summer isn't about to begin. Traces of snow have been found here on the last day of May and the latest frost in the past decade was recorded on 21 May. April temperatures can swing from 15 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit, while the range in May can be from 29 to 95 – a far cry from my native Gloucestershire but even so, this site has not made me a timid gardener. Having literally grown up with Rosemary Verey's deft use of half-hardy perennials and then been set loose in Kew's incomparably wide-ranging living collections, horticultural conservatism is not in my nature. We consistently trial and even succeed with items that by conventional wisdom should not grow at Stonecrop, or do so only with rather extraordinary efforts on the part of my colleagues, myself and our students. Gardening on this hilltop, however, has taught me a deep appreciation for the sturdy, reliable, and sometimes commonplace plants that greet me year after year.

To visualise Stonecrop in the spring let us imagine a stroll following the route suggested to all visitors, beginning at the Potting Shed, the garden's beating heart. Like the rest of our buildings, the proportions are rooted in Quebec, sturdy but not inelegant, conveying a welcoming sense of security. The steep bonnet roof is clad in weathered cedar shakes; walls are a subtle chalky tan; the window trim a creamy white; the doors our signature Stonecrop blue, something of a soft French blue. The Potting Shed is where visitors converge at the start of tours and where our office is located. It is also where staff and students gather each morning to chart the day and, rain or shine, where many of us tend to a wide

array of chores. It is the most comfortable place on site, relatively warm in cold weather and reasonably cool in the heat. It is also where we keep our communal food and drink, essential to keeping energy levels and spirits up through long days of physical labour. Everyone contributes something, and as gardeners are often enthusiastic cooks, the fare can be surprisingly good. Store-bought ginger snaps are never turned away, and countless cups of tea are shared. (When the blend is Russian Caravan I am invariably reminded of my numerous visits to another great gardener, Valerie Finnis, in Northamptonshire, including one occasion when I left with an enormous basket of ripe cherries balanced on the back of my motorbike. It also reminds of the role the Waterperry Horticultural School in Oxfordshire plays in my hopes for Stonecrop.)

Heading out from the Potting Shed we experience typical Stonecrop views. Our 1,970 square foot cruciform Conservatory rises Avalon-like out of water, framed by a pair of spring glories: a fine *Prunus* × *yedoensis*, large enough to scatter petals like pink snow and, on the far side of the pond, a sweeping, forty-foot-tall *Magnolia* ‘Elizabeth’, its yellow blossoms reflecting ad infinitum on the water’s surface, echoed by the bright yellow of *Iris pseudacorus* around the banks.

From there, we head towards the main house along the Fern Vista. This is a simple, satisfying space: a long, narrow lawn bounded on one side by a row of maples and a low, dry-stone wall, and on the other by a thick swathe of ostrich ferns set against high walls. An encouraging spring sight is the early daffodils blooming in the grass before the ferns come in to their own. The daffs are followed by a flush of muscari. I have been planting bulbs in earnest, often more than forty thousand a year, for nearly three decades. If the weather stays mild, Stonecrop is alight with spring bulbs for a month and a half – sometimes longer. Alas, though, it isn’t uncommon for a few unseasonably warm days to halt the show abruptly as we progress almost directly from winter to summer. This element of chance makes those long, luscious springs all the more precious, and it is for those that we plan. As they thrive and multiply here, daffodils still dominate the display. A few of my favourites



'Miss Jekyll' standing guard over the Inner Sanctum



The Wisteria Pavilion

include 'Thalia', 'W. P. Milner', 'Pipit' and 'Hawera', each lovely of form yet sturdy in nature and never failing to delight.

Rounding the corner at the end of the Fern Vista, the main house is suddenly visible through a small apple orchard. Still used by the Cabot family, this is another Québécois construction, here lined with an arcade of French doors. In its understated forecourt waits another spring treasure, *Halesia monticola* 'Vestita', lone survivor of a large shipment of trees and shrubs from Hillier's nursery in England in the late 1960s. A choice cultivar of an American native, this now forty-five-foot towering tree stands guard at the entrance to the Flower Garden, where on or about 15 May is covered in a profusion of very large soft pink bells.

The Flower Garden is actually a series of spaces, the Outer Sanctum, the Black Garden, the Skinny Vista and the Inner Sanctum, defined by eight-foot-high wooden walls to give protection from bitter winds and thus create an invaluable microclimate. The plantings here are densely layered and, without doubt, the garden's most labour-intensive area. In spring, when herbaceous growth is just beginning and these spaces feel relatively open, one can best appreciate the framework of trees, shrubs and garden structures – the tool shed, various elaborate benches, the fence itself, and an array of steeple-like trellises or *tuteurs*. Such clear structure prevents the garden – called 'a vault full of jewels' by the *New York Times* – from devolving into chaos. Another organising force is the bespectacled Miss Jekyll 'sculpture', standing guard over the Inner Sanctum. She receives an annual spring make-over – more salt hay and a new hessian dress. She has become rather stout over the years, but is no less admired.

Early in the year these vertical elements emerge from a sea of bulbs, predominantly tulips. It wouldn't be spring without the red-hot 'Queen of Sheba', the cool elegance of 'Spring Green', or the polished 'West Point', just like the United States Military Academy across the Hudson River from us. A favourite combination is *Tulipa* 'Apricot Beauty' and *Hyacinthus orientalis* 'Gypsy Queen', both richly shaded from apricot through salmon and rose, but dramatically different in form and texture. As the tulips fade the bulb

display continues with an array of alliums and camassias – the latter being a garden-worthy dash of true Americana. Native to our moist north meadows, camassia bulbs – roasted, boiled or ground into flour – were a food staple for numerous First Nation peoples as well as the members of the 1804–06 Lewis and Clark expedition across the Western United States.

Leaving the Flower Garden, we discover a spring paradise in the Alpine House, the Raised Lime and Ericaceous Beds, the Pit House, the Raised Alpine Beds and further along, the Rock Ledge – ample evidence of Stonecrop’s historical emphasis on alpines. Disappointed with the selection of alpines grown in the United States, the Cabots, with typical aplomb, opened a mail-order business here in the early 1960s under the direction of Rex Murfitt, a long-time propagator at Ingwersen’s nursery on William Robinson’s famed Gravetye Estate in Sussex. Many venerable specimens remain, too many to recount, and the tradition of excellence continues.

I must, however, mention a large clump of *Adonis vernalis*, nestled beside a juniper in the Raised Beds, where the cheery yellow buttercups show to best advantage. Bulbs play a key role in these areas, as well. I never tire of the bronze shadings of *Tulipa whittallii* and *Euphorbia polychroma* with a base note of blue muscari, while *Alyssum armenum* and the aforementioned *Narcissus* ‘Hawera’ resonate at a higher pitch. Stonecrop now collaborates with the North American Rock Garden Society, hosting a major plant sale each April that attracts growers and collectors from far and wide.

Between the Raised Beds and the Rock Ledge is the Gravel Garden. One plant there always makes me pause. I made my first visit to Kiftsgate Court in Gloucestershire as a teenager, naturally in the company of Rosemary Verey. I remember two things quite clearly: Diany Binny sitting at the desk smoking a cheroot, and her hillside of *Lathyrus vernus*. I had to have it – the lathyrus, I mean, not the cheroot. Now I do, and am well pleased.

A slow stream flows down our precipitous Rock Ledge below the Gravel Garden, creating tiny pools and falls, with just enough sound to soothe visitors traversing the steepest steps. This water drops to the Lake where the Wisteria Pavilion is situated at one end.

Conceived as a piece, Ledge, Lake and Pavilion were just being built under Frank's direction when I started my life at Stonecrop. The airy pavilion bears the attenuated bonnet roof seen elsewhere in garden, here in a distinctive lattice form, as well as a series of 'moon' windows framing judiciously composed views. In spring the wisteria blooms in almost unnatural profusion, carefully (and wisely) held away from the wooden structure by a network of steel cables. The Cabots would typically leave Cold Spring for Canada earlier in the spring, which meant that it wasn't until recently that they first saw the culmination of their long-ago vision: lilac cascades illuminating black water.

Heading back up the hill is an extensive Woodland Garden. While there are many choice items (*Sinocalycanthus sinensis* and *Helleborus lividus* 'Ken Aslet' come to mind), native plants more than pull their weight. When all else is grey, the woods light up with the tiny white flowers of *Amelanchier canadensis*, the shadblow, a tree that blooms when shad are running in the Hudson River. Next, the classic *Cornus florida* takes the stage. Moving down in height, there are many great native shrubs. A favourite is foothergilla, discovered by the American William Bartram, named for his English patron and first described in his 1791 *Travels Through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida*. Well worth acquiring are both species, *Fothergilla major* and the smaller *F. gardenii*, as well as their excellent crosses. Fragrant, greenish-white bottlebrush inflorescences appear before the leaves emerge; its sturdy foliage is dark blue-green, making a long-lasting autumn show of brilliant yellow, orange and red on the same plant, very like its relative, the Persian ironwood, *Parrotia persica*.

The woodland floor is awash with native plants, including *Adiantum pedatum*, a fern of true grace; *Cypripedium calceolus* var. *pubescens*, the large yellow lady's slipper orchid; *Darmera peltata*, with massive leaves and great presence; *Epigaea repens*, the first flower seen in the New World by Mayflower passengers; *Erythronium americanum*, a spreader of charm; *Mertensia virginica*, Virginia bluebells; both *Sanguinaria canadensis* and the double-flowered *S. c. multiplex*, as well as the red-flowered *Trillium erectum* and the white *T. grandiflorum*.

A combination I find satisfying is the indigenous *Vancouveria hexandra* underneath *Rhododendron yakushimanum*. This leads to Gus's Slope which, in a very loose sense, is also comprised of native plants. Dr Gustav Malmquist was an early hybridiser of *Rhododendron mucronulatum* and *R. yakushimanum*, who developed some wonderful early-flowering, typically soft-pink varieties. As he worked in nearby Connecticut, Frank and I went to see him in 1991 and found we couldn't hold back. Our extensive collection is appropriately if rather obviously named. The stunning finale in our spring woodland and forests throughout the region comes with the flowering of *Kalmia latifolia*, an evergreen ericaceous shrub that erupts in clusters of white blossom.

It seems a dizzying tour, and yet there are still more significant garden areas that have not been mentioned. A larger omission has been made: in the process of introducing the garden features and springtime botanical highlights at Stonecrop, I've not had a chance to touch upon our staff, interns and visitors. These individuals are the lifeblood at Stonecrop, without which the garden would not, could not, be what it is. As we continue to explore Stonecrop through the seasons, be sure they will be given their due.

Notes and acknowledgements

My thanks to Kate Kerin, who greatly assisted me in the writing of this article. Kate received her Master's Degree in landscape architecture from Cornell University before completing the Stonecrop Internship Programme in 1999. In addition to her own garden-design practice she serves as Stonecrop's newsletter editor.

Page 40: Cholmondeley Among Puschkinias
(Cholmondeley is Stonecrop's Head of Rodent Control)

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