

taught, of course. ("it has taken me four years to beat it into submission." he says.) Despite his reputation a curmudgeon, he is also given to kindness- a garden is nothing if not shared. He loves to paint himself as a long-suffering Job, yet he knows he has led a rare and joyful life.

Hope springs eternal

Ross has told his story so many times, he recites it by rote. In an interview last week, he gave many of the same quotes- word for word- as have appeared in the stacks of newspaper and magazine articles written about him over the last 30-odd years. He's done telling that story, though. His thoughts now are consumed with LaRosa's training and increasing the endowment required to keep Gardenview thriving long after he returns to the earth. The Endowment currently stands at \$500,000. Ross figures Gardenview needs \$700,000 to generate enough money to pay a full-time caretaker. To maintain Gardenview in the way Ross says it should be maintained, would require 10 full time working gardeners which would require a \$7 million endowment. (Yes, he did it alone for 40 years. Until recently, he worked 18-hour days, seven days a week.)

LaRosa wants to work harder at increasing the \$25 a year membership. (Members have access anytime, by appointment. Nonmembers, admitted from noon to 6PM Saturdays and Sundays, during the growing season, pay \$5 for adults and \$3 for children.

Ross still works all day, every day in the garden. He has never left for more than half a day. There's too much to do. The work now includes tagging every plant so LaRosa can learn them. While LaRosa talks about plans for expansion and things he might do differently, he shares Ross' vision for Gardenview's longevity. "I don't care what people say about me." LaRosa says. "I want to be remembered as the same crazy nut that Henry was."

Ross bends to his knees more slowly now, he no longer toils until midnight in the greenhouse. He has seen enough of life and death to know his season is growing short. Even in death, he will fight for Gardenview's survival. He plans to be cremated, with his ashes poured into a 3-foot deep hole on the grounds, then covered over with concrete.

"So, if the bulldozer ever comes to push everything out," he says wild-eyed, "they're gonna hit that and go "Jee-sus!"

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Akron Beacon Journal-June 7, 1996

An alchemist and
his apprentice create
a chaotic Eden

Paradise IN THE WILD

Once upon a time, there was a man who dreamed a garden into being, an alchemist who created his own plants, a curator of some of the rarest flowers in the world. The garden consumed him; he spent every waking hour there, living in a cottage like a hermit, railing at anyone who tried to interrupt his dream. Some thought he was crazy; in some ways he was.

The man grew old and, heirless, he began to fret over who would continue his life's work.

Then the fates smiled and a young gardener came through the front gate and declared that he would continue the dream.

Yes, this is a fairy tale. It also happens to be a true story, taking place in a nearby town whose name seems perfect for Henry A. Ross- Strongsville, the village of the strong.

It's hardly a stretch to call Ross half man, half myth, living as he does in a wooden cottage he built himself, tending to his nature preserve even as the world shoves its elbows at him from every angle, with strip malls, car lots and housing developments. Ross has always shoved back, jealously guarding every inch of the 16 acres he transformed in 47 years, from a bramble covered bog to an English-style garden that has become world famous- Gardenview Horticultural Park. Maybe you've heard of it, maybe you've been there. Maybe you've heard of the stories of its past as Ross battles with City and State officials, of his fame as a plantsman and an eccentric, of his rare dedication to beauty.

Ross, however, isn't concerned with the past. Not now. Single-minded as ever, he's focused on the future. Craggily handsome and filled with the magic light of a fanatic, the 69 year old places his hand on the shoulder of Mark LaRosa 29, who came to Gardenview one day and decided to stay. For years, Ross has sought an apprentice, but found most people unwilling to take on a job whose requirements include living like a pauper, working from sunrise to sunset and fighting a battle for independence that requires nearly as much energy as tending those 16 acres.

"You've got to have a nut that is completely dedicated" Ross says in a voice that often cracks with pleasure midsentence. In LaRosa, who graduated from Cuyahoga Community College in 1994 with a degree in plant science technology, he seems to have found Gardenview's future.

The pair live together in the tiny cottage in a corner of the six acres that compromise the garden proper. (The other 10 acres are an arboretum). Ross is old. LaRosa is young. LaRosa washes his dinner plate before and after eating. Ross' lifestyle reflects the controlled chaos that defines the English garden. LaRosa is friendly and talkative. Ross has little need for anyone not genuinely interested in his dream. Ross is innately distrustful of consumerism, preferring to mend his tattered jeans than replace them; LaRosa trots around Gardenview in a cap adorned with a Nike swoosh. LaRosa believes in destiny; Ross says it's horse manure. (This is the man who knows horse manure-- over the years, he has shoveled 4,000 truckloads of it into Gardenview's beds.) Still they coexist in this Garden of Eden.

Color it unusual

Gardenview embodies the English style, wild in a calculated way. The walks wind through beds of hostas, forget-me-nots, azaleas, primroses, flowering onions and stunningly colorful big-headed tree peonies. The varieties are countless and change gracefully through the growing season. In every case, Ross goes for the unusual. Trees are everywhere, but not the usual green. Ross goes for varieties with golden leaves, each of which creates a halolike glow. Beyond the initial set of beds lie two ponds, home to Canada geese and mallard ducks.

An English garden used to occupy the land behind the ponds, but it was decimated by two years of drought in 1993 and 1994. (Watering is a constant challenge. Ross uses expensive city water sparingly, but his ground water has become contaminated with salt and boron, and he can use it only for certain applications.

The 10 acres at the rear of the property are dedicated to an arboretum, home to 500 varieties of crab apple trees, as well as mountain ashes, flowering cherries, dogwoods, oaks and others. There are also 100,000 daffodils back there, planted around the tree's trunks.

Ross is an expert in rare varieties of plants. He is known worldwide for his collection, a benefit that allows him to trade for other rarities. "I have a few super, super yummys that I can get anything for", he says. These are indeed gems, the true plant lover will spot varieties he or she has never seen before-- variegated Chinese forget-me-nots, and variegated Aralia for instance. Ross has also originated- and holds patents on- a number of his own plants, including Hosta Solar Flare, a golden-leaved Hosta, and Ajuga Arctic Fox. A method of propagating plants is even named for him - Rossizing.

His beds, which emit the faint but unmistakable scent of manure he gets from an area horse farm, are clean as a whistle- he is an incessant weeder. The main thing he has cultivated in his lifetime here, though, is a wild Emersonian independence. In the face of modern reality, even as yet another mammoth mall is being constructed just down the road, he has enclosed himself in primeval beauty. He has done it all himself.

Offbeat legend

Gardenview's story is the stuff of local legend. Ross, an east Cleveland native who began gardening at the age of 8, discovered this land in Strongsville, midway between Akron and Cleveland, while studying Horticulture at Ohio State University. When he graduated - 1 1/2 years early, because he had already read all of the books- he borrowed the money to buy it. Only problem was, he had looked at the land in the winter, when it was covered with snow. After the Spring thaw, he discovered his plot thick with clay and covered with blackberry brambles and water that had nowhere to go. Never short on energy, he began to work the land, digging an elaborate drainage system by hand, and turning the soil into the wondrously fertile earth it is now.

For 25 years, he worked as a florist in the Cleveland area, putting every penny into Gardenview. As the garden, arboretum and impressive library evolved, Ross found the property taxes overwhelming. He offered to donate the land to the City of Strongsville, with the sole provision that it be maintained as a public garden forever. Strongsville counteroffered; Give us the land and we'll do with it as we please and name a service garage after you. Nothing doing. Ross obtained nonprofit status in 1961, relieving him of the tax burden, and turned Gardenview into a public garden park. In that sense, especially to American thinking, Gardenview is an enigma--- a park that is not a government-owned playground, a nonprofit institution that charges admission. These kind of gardens are common in Europe, but Ross says this is the only one of its kind in the States.

Meanwhile, battles continued, over Ross' right to build without a permit, over his right to erect a fence. Every time he won.

In the 1960's he weaned himself from his florist's job; in 1969 he quit altogether to devote himself even more fully to Gardenview. He now receives a social security pension, continuing to pour everything into the gardens. He survives by frugality, figuring all he really needs is \$2,000 a year for food. "The reason I have financial independence is because I don't need money," he says.

Some parts of the story have never been told, though. While it's easy to assume that Ross is a back-to-nature quack, he embraces certain elements of the modern age. He's a big Star Trek fan, for instance, and has always been interested in science fiction. (What is gardening, if not science fiction?) He's also a computer whiz. Self