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GARDENS TO VISIT

GARDENVIEW



A plantsman's paradise

Thomas Fischer



Left: In spring, waves of pink azaleas contribute to Gardenview's atmosphere of flowery informality. Top: Forget-me-nots, violets, symphytums, and Bowles' golden grass form broad sheets of color. Above: Henry Ross as he usually is—at work.

DRIVING ALONG ROUTE 42 in Strongsville, Ohio, about 18 miles southwest of downtown Cleveland, I could be anywhere in the country—the strip malls, gas stations, and fast-food joints whiz past the way they do in a zillion other suburbs. It looks like the last place in the world for a garden, even if I turn a blind eye to the wretched junipers and wax begonias in front of the McDonald's. But as I get near the south end of town, the buildings start to thin, and suddenly a sea of greenery rises above a rickety eight-foot-high wall. A small sign declares this place to be my destination: Gardenview Horticultural Park.

As I get out of the car I am greeted by a figure who could be an elemental earth spirit. The tattered work clothes of the serious gardener don't faze me, but the toothy (and slightly gappy) grin, the large features, the wild mane of graying hair, and the fact that he is covered head to toe with a thick layer of peat moss dust are, at first, a little alarming. This is Henry Ross, founder, director, and sole caretaker of Gardenview. The qualifications for the job are simple: You have to be Henry, which is to say plantsman and gardener extraordinaire, with a touch of prophet-crying-in-the-wilderness thrown in for good measure.

Although I had been corresponding with Ross for several months and was

familiar with his reputation in the horticultural world (for his rare plants and for being a mite tetchy), I wasn't quite sure what to expect, either of the man himself or of the garden that he has made his life's work. Ross had told me that I was welcome to visit, "but don't expect to see a Keukenhof or a Longwood." He was right so far—Gardenview is about as far from formal as you can get. Its 16 acres, which form a long, narrow strip that runs back from the busy road, consist mostly of densely planted, gently curving beds, with grass paths, a stream, a couple of ponds, an "arboretum," and several paved areas for variety. Moreover, there are no fancy buildings or garden structures—just modest greenhouses, sheds, pergolas, and a small house, which Ross has built with his own hands.

Gardenview began over 44 years ago when Ross, now 67, was a student at Ohio State University. "I would pass this piece of land whenever I came home for the weekend," he recalls, "and I knew that here I could create the kind of garden I imagined. Fortunately, I was able to borrow the \$7,500 I needed to buy it. Of course, none of this," he says, gesturing vaguely at the encroaching suburban clutter, "was there back then; otherwise I never would have been able to afford it."

Since that time, Ross has devoted every spare moment to realizing his dream. In order to ensure the future of Gardenview, in 1961 he donated it to the public, which meant that it could legally become a nonprofit, tax-exempt institution. In 1969, he quit his part-time florist job so he could devote all his energies to Gardenview. When I ask Ross whether developers have ever tried to get him to part with his prime commercial real estate, he chuckles with glee. "It drives them *crazy*," he replies. "But they'll never lay a finger on it while there's a breath left in my body."

Of course, running a public garden single-handedly is no easy task. As Ross will remind you, "It should be obvious to

any thinking person that it is physically impossible for any one person to maintain 16 acres of gardens all by himself," and he isn't getting any younger. But even if the hardscape looks a bit makeshift and some of the nether reaches of the garden aren't immaculately groomed, there are few other gardens where the soul of the gardener is so clearly reflected in his creation. For Ross is above all a lover of floral beauty, and Gardenview, on the spring day I first visited it, was a picture of flowery abandon.

Ross calls the sinuous beds closest to the visitor's parking lot his Spring Garden, and from March to late May the procession of color never ceases. The



Above: Aside from one 15-month period, for the last 44 years Ross has dug, planted, pruned, and weeded alone. Right: The small stream that flows through Gardenview provides a picturesque setting for cascading alyssum and rock cress.





stars of the early part of the season are the "little bulbs," such as snowdrops, scillas, winter aconites, and chionodoxas; early narcissus; and hellebores by the hundred. (Ross has been growing and hybridizing hellebores for over 40 years, long before they became the trendy perennials they are today.) Next come the pulmonarias, with their bold silver-spotted foliage and frothy pink and blue flowers, against a backdrop of pale pink azaleas; in May, Ross's beloved crab apples take center stage along with tulips. When the show starts to slow down, Ross sets out thousands of summer annuals to continue the display. This particular year it is ruby chard and tall nicotianas in mixed colors to set off the huge, cabbagey leaves of the variegated brunneras that dot the beds.

As we stroll toward the back of the six-acre plot that constitutes the main part of the garden, I comment on how rich and black the soil looks. "You're walking on three feet of pure horse manure," Ross says proudly. (Actually, he uses a somewhat earthier term.) "When I started gardening here there was nothing but solid blue clay. Since then I've brought in over 2,500 truckloads of manure, and every year I add another 300 to 400 truckloads." The results are evident everywhere: hostas that look like they've been fed steroids; clumps of *Acanthus spinosus* that could eat most other perennials in one bite.

Just beyond the Spring Garden, near the greenhouses, are the All Season Gardens. Although these too have their share of early-blooming plants, summer is when they really come into their own. For as much as he loves to plant huge drifts of hardy perennials, Ross is also a master at creating beautifully textured bedding schemes that rely on tender annuals and even conservatory plants. One July visit, for example, showed an island bed dominated by cleomes and the six-foot spires of *Nicotiana sylvestris*, set off by the tropical foliage of variegated cannas and the serrated, fingerlike leaflets of *Melianthus major*; perhaps the most spectacular blue-leaved plant in existence. Tying these giants together were the deep burgundy culms of the tender ornamental grass *Pennisetum setaceum* 'Rubrum'. Close by—but strategically screened by intervening trees—Ross had composed another scheme in creams and pale yellows, using yellow daturas and daylilies, the striped, swordlike leaves of *Iris pseudacorus* 'Variegata', and pale yellow petunias. Clumps of dark red coleus kept the picture from becoming too bland.

Farther along, a maze of meandering



JUDITH BROMLEY

IF YOU GO

Gardenview Horticultural Park is located on Route 42 (Pearl Road), one and a half miles south of Route 82, in Strongsville, Ohio.

The garden is open free to members every day from noon to 6 P.M., and by appointment. Nonmembers are admitted from April 1 to October 15, Saturday and Sunday only, from noon to 6 P.M.; admission is \$3.50 for adults and \$2 for children.

Annual memberships begin at \$25. For more information, write Gardenview Horticultural Park, 16711 Pearl Road, Strongsville, OH 44136; telephone 216-238-6653.

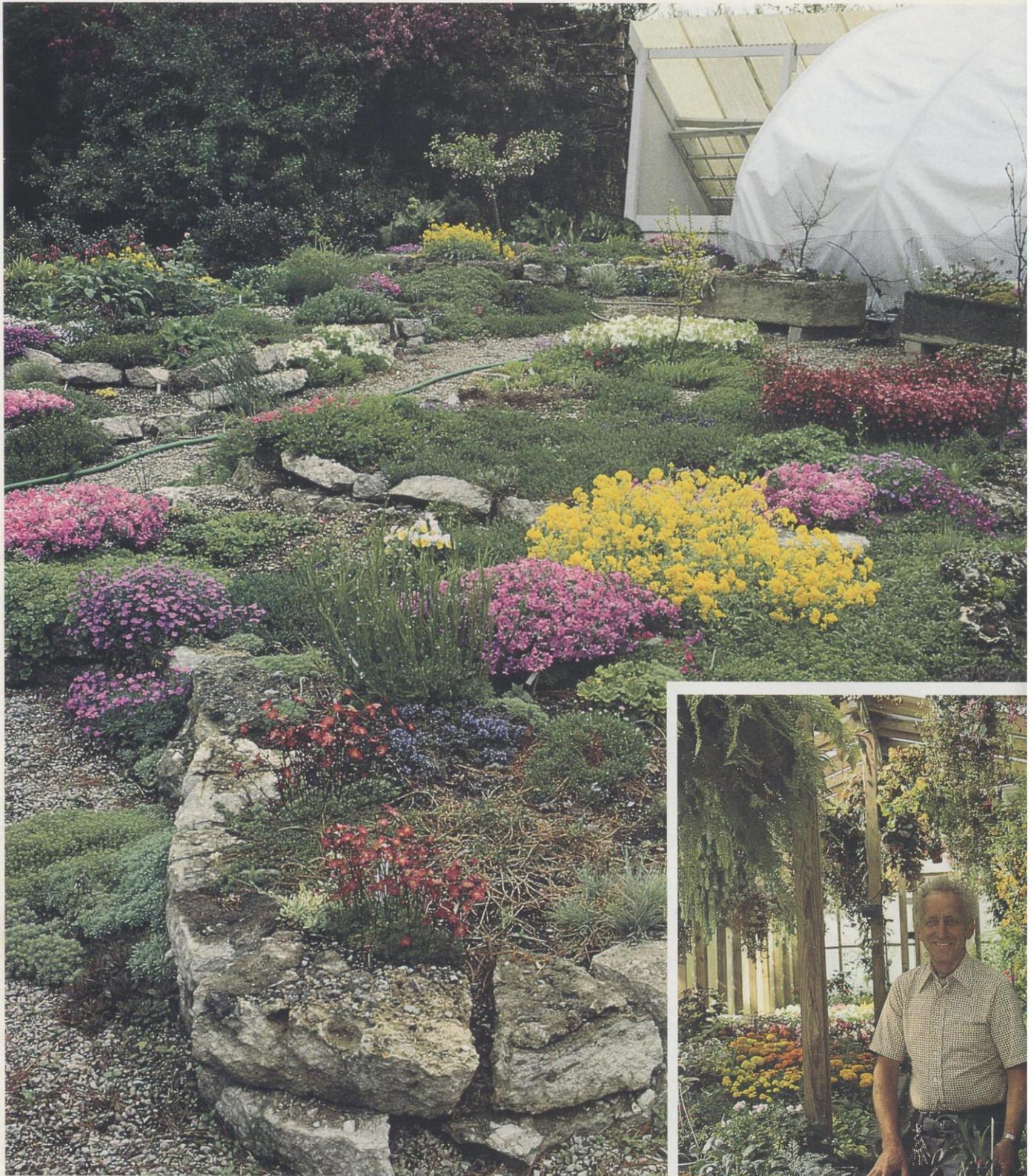
this part of the garden in 1986. Here, island beds punctuated with dwarf conifers are home to colorful drifts of achilleas, daylilies, delphiniums, eryngiums, hollyhocks, and veronicas—all reminiscent of the cottage gardens Ross so admires. Gaynor's tenure at Gardenview, though brief, left a lasting impression on Ross. "Andrew told me that this was the only garden he'd seen in this country that could compare with the gardens in Britain," Ross says wistfully. "The day he went back to Dublin I bawled like a baby and couldn't stop for a week." Given Gardenview's shoestring budget and the general shortage of "real gardeners," as Ross puts it, Gaynor is unlikely to have many successors. Ross sums up the situation thus: "I'm constantly getting letters saying, 'I am a college graduate and that qualifies me for any kind of a supervisory or executive position you may have and I only want \$35,000 a year to start for a 40-hour week.'" A derisive snort reveals what Ross thinks of the hapless applicants. Nevertheless, he still hopes someday to find that elusive paragon—a young, idealistic gardener whom he can groom to take over the running of Gardenview.

Beyond Andrew's Garden, the property widens out into the 10-acre

Arboretum, an area that looks fairly wild in summer but in spring is bright with over 2,000 flowering trees and innumerable daffodils. Of all the choice trees in Gardenview, the crab apples are perhaps closest to Ross's heart. While a number of crabs have managed to win his favor—the columnar 'Van Eseltine' and the red-flowered 'Lemoine', for example—his own 'Coralburst' elicits a flood of eloquence. "Hardly anyone knows about it," he says, "even though it's the only crab like it. It makes a compact, round head that requires no pruning, and it is glorious in bloom, with brilliant coral-pink buds that open to double white flowers about an inch across. On top of that, it has tiny, boxwoodlike leaves. When young, it has the effect of a tree rose." As might be expected, 'Coralburst' is used liberally throughout Gardenview, to anchor the overflowing beds of herbaceous plants and keep them from appearing too amorphous. Interestingly, because of its geometric outline and fine foliage, 'Coralburst' also works well in a much more formal setting at Kingwood Center, a public garden in nearby Mansfield.

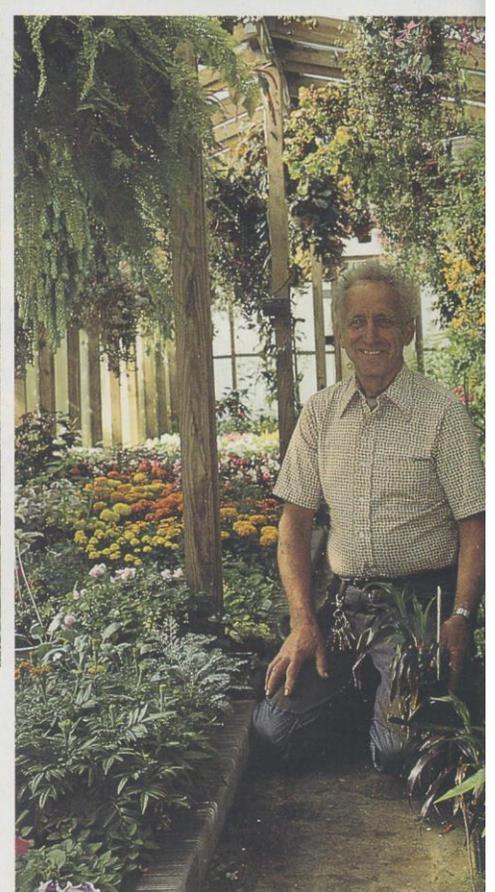
This passion for crab apples reveals another aspect of Ross's gardening personality—that of the connoisseur of beautiful and unusual plants. During even the most casual stroll through the garden, alert visitors will notice, among the more familiar border denizens, plants that will make them turn as green as the surrounding verdure. In one corner, for instance, the scarce celandine 'Brazen Hussy' sports bright yellow flowers atop glossy purple-black leaves. Close by, *Clematis triternata* 'Rubro-marginata', an easily grown but seldom seen hybrid of *C. flammula*, throws cascades of small, fragrant, rosy flowers with a creamy edge over a tripod. But the most conspicuous treasures are the variegated plants. When Ross points out his green-and-cream-leaved, white-flowered specimen of *Mertensia virginica*, it is hard to resist the temptation to snatch it up by the roots and run. An even greater inducement to crime is an ajuga that Ross has bred and patented, called 'Arctic Fox'. Its leaves are almost entirely white, with the thinnest of dark green rims and a hint of gray in the centers. The flowers—almost a superfluity—are the usual blue, but they gain in elegance against the background of ghostly foliage. Fortunately, 'Arctic Fox' is now commercially available. Two other welcome and readily obtainable Ross introductions are *Monarda* 'Gardenview Scarlet', a clone as brilliant as the familiar 'Cambridge Scarlet' but much more resis-





paths takes you past tangles of plants—symphytums and more hostas and pulmonarias—past the ponds Ross is currently sprucing up, to an area he calls “Andrew’s Garden,” after Andrew Gaynor. This young Irishman spent a year working for Ross and helped create

Above: Raised beds are home to saxifrages, phlox, and other alpinas. Top, right: Ajuga ‘Arctic Fox’, one of Ross’s most exciting introductions. Right: Ross in one of the greenhouses, where he raises some of the annuals he plants out each summer and cossets his tropical treasures.



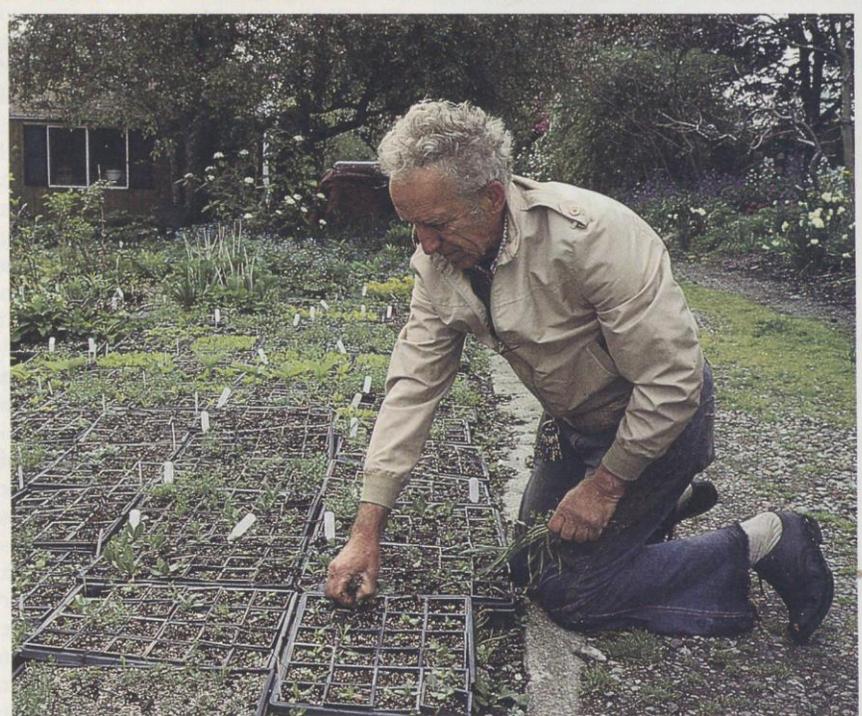


JUDITH BROMLEY

tant to mildew and the patented, gold-leaved hosta, 'Solar Flare'.

For all his infectious enthusiasm about plants, Ross holds some fairly strong opinions about other aspects of gardening, and he doesn't hesitate to express them. When asked about the purpose of gardening, Ross replies, "Gardening is flowers. Gardening is ornamental and strictly for pleasure. Growing vegetables is *not* gardening. A person who plants and grows a few tomato plants or radishes is not a gardener but a vegetable grower or a mini-farmer." And woe betide the innocent visitor who, looking at the garden's considerable acreage, asks whether Ross's planting schemes are low maintenance. "Most people out there," he scowls, "are only interested in low-maintenance, no-maintenance landscaping rather than in real gardening. To them, plants are nothing but green lumps whose only function is to fill in a space and remain green. Why don't they just use plastic plants, since these are totally disease-free and require no care at all?"

Though it is possible to be taken slightly aback when the conversation touches on one of Ross's bêtes noires, it is



hard to argue with his common-sense crusade against the term *cultivar*. Ross objects to the word because, as it is defined and used at present, it does not distinguish between plants grown from seed (such as *Heuchera* 'Palace Purple'),

Top: The All Season Gardens feature a display of tender and hardy plants that changes from year to year. Above: Ross among some of the thousands of seedlings that make Gardenview into what he calls "an oasis of beauty."

which are genetically variable, and plants that are vegetatively propagated and therefore genetically identical to the parent plant. For Ross, it's a clear case of apples and oranges: "There is no way we can continue to use the term *cultivar* to mean clone and, at the same time, to mean a mixture of similar but not identical seedlings. If we replace *cultivar* with *seed strain* and *clone*, everyone will understand what is meant, and people will know if they're getting a plant that's identical to the original."

About the only time this passionate, vociferous gardener becomes subdued is when the subject turns to the fate of his garden. Ross *is* Gardenview; for most of its existence he has tended it alone. He is unmarried, and has no children to carry on after him. Nor is he a wealthy man, who with the stroke of a pen can ensure that his creation will be cared for in perpetuity. And so Ross has his hopes pegged on building up an endowment to keep the garden going. He figures it will take at least \$5 million to support a staff of 10 full-time gardeners. (The equation of 10 ordinary gardeners to one Henry Ross seems about right.)

To date, Ross has accumulated less than a tenth of his goal. But even on days when he worries about what will happen to the garden when he starts to slow down, there are always plenty of other matters to attend to: potting up seedlings, spreading manure, or engaging in a little horse trading for a rare plant he's lusted after. Despite the setbacks and disappointments that occasionally interrupt his routine, Ross always has the vision of "real gardening" before him for inspiration. It is a vision that he would like to see take hold across the country. "It's not a question anymore of not being able to get the plants," he says. "We have plenty of plant treasures in this country for gardeners to use. But things will never get rolling until we stop describing real gardening as too much work, or an undesirable chore, or a waste of time. We should be emphasizing how much fun real gardening is, and how much pleasure we can get out of it. Can you imagine what an absolutely gorgeous country we would have if everyone went all out to have the most beautiful ornamental garden possible? It would be spectacular." Spoken like a real gardener. ✎

Thomas Fischer is senior editor of this magazine.

For sources of the Henry Ross introductions mentioned in this article, see page 86.