

HENRY ROSS, A PROFESSIONAL GARDENER

Susan A. McClure

After laboring singlehandedly for nearly fifty years to create a worldclass garden, Henry Ross began to recognize a flaw in the American system. Henry Ross, caretaker, garden designer, propagator, handyman and creator of Gardenview, in Strongsville, is a professional gardener, a term of his own definition, and he is a rare and endangered species in America.

The term, professional gardener, applies to individuals who work full time for others, creating, physically installing and/or maintaining a high quality garden or gardens, without the need for guidance or supervision. Excluded from the professional gardener classification are recreational gardeners, landscape designers and architects, supervisors or executives and laborers who need supervision. Also excluded are creative artists who differ from professional gardeners by the fact that they garden for themselves.

The professional gardener, a craftsman not uncommon in Great Britain and on the Continent but quite rare in America, originally inspired Ross. At age eight, he began to read about the great gardens of Europe and to dream that some day he could create a garden of equal merit.

Henry attended Ohio State University, earning a horticulture degree in two and one half years. "It was so easy. I had already read all the books," he explained. Whereas most graduates leave college ready to make their fortune and climb the executive ladder, Henry purchased 16 acres of abandoned land in Strongsville and began to develop his dream.

Henry labored for years to turn inhospitable acreage into paradise. A *Traveler's Guide to North American Gardens* by Harry Logan acknowledged his efforts. "In 1949 the park was a barren parcel of blue and yellow clay; it has since been developed and maintained throughout the succeeding years by a single individual (and still is). This has been a prodigious accomplishment, particularly in soil reclamation and improvement; especially since the park is neither tax-supported nor endowed."

After the barren land grew fertile with the application of tons of horse manure, Henry applied his horticultural skills to garden design. Ross does not keep records nor does he plan beds on paper before planting. "I just don't have time to do everything I'd like to." Instead, he begins in one corner of a bed with the taller and works down to smaller plants creating sweeps of color like an artist would paint a canvas.

Ross has combined an assortment of garden styles into Gardenview. Upon entering, one first views the spring garden of tulips, daffodils, azaleas and crabapples, which are replaced in summer by annual flower combinations. From there a winding path passes through a shade garden of hostas, violets, and helleborus, to a cottage garden of unusual annuals and perennials. A promenade toward the ten acre arboretum passes two ponds, home to waterlilies, ducks and geese, and a new English Garden. Upon returning one would loop by an alpine rock garden, exotic fowl house and the library.

Horticultural leaders such as Pamela Harper, John Elsley, and Frederick McGourty, have recognized the excellence of Ross' efforts. After a visit last October, Christopher Lloyd wrote, "I must thank you for the pleasure I had last month of visiting you and your garden. You've made a fine place of it, and so varied. A lovely, eye-satisfying display of annuals as you come in, then all the perennials, many desirable trees and finally the milder plants that you have not tried to do too much with but have underplanted with bulbs.

"It's a fine example of what can be done in your part of the world and I'm sure that many of your countrymen seeing it will be encouraged to do likewise. The excuse of a tough climate, for not attempting a garden is heard too often and you quite clearly proved the fallacy."

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Last year, the entrance beds abounded with single and double petunias, crimson-leaved celosia 'Brushfire', 'Inca' marigolds, tall fragrant white nicotiana, blue salvia, ruby Swiss chard, and *Rudbeckia* varieties. The combination changes each year.

Another way in which Ross utilizes his education and experience has been in developing collections of unusual plants which are much coveted by nurserymen throughout America. He uses these to trade for others. "I'm not interested in the commercial aspect of plant collecting. I wish I could concentrate on growing plants and could forget about everything else."

Although Ross is not a plant breeder, he has made selections of *Viola odorata*, *Hosta*, and *Helleborus orientalis* from seedlings self-sown at Gardenview.

Ross' fragrant violets make up the largest and most unique collection in the country. "I started years ago with a variety called 'Rosina', a tiny pink flowered one that's extremely fragrant. It's been on the market for years. It must have crossed with another violet for the seedlings flower in every color you could imagine, white through pink, purple to maroon, grayish-lavendar and white with blotches. It's a

marvelous ground cover. Before the leaves come up, a mass of extremely fragrant flowers literally covers the ground. I've given some to commercial growers and save the rest as a trading ace-in-the-hole."

About twenty years ago, Ross searched nationwide for Lenten roses for his shade garden. After much difficulty, he was able to procure a few seedlings from the University of Georgia. Now these plants have self-sown and produced not only the more common red flowered types but also white and pink forms. Nine of these were named in spring, 1984.

From an original collection of forty named hosta varieties, Ross has selected many superior types from their seedlings. Three of his best have been named and are available commercially. They are 'Witches Brew', a heavily puckered green, 'Crown Prince', a golden-centered, kelly-green edged leaf, and 'Solar Flare', a huge golden leaf with green veins.

Ross' other collections are equally worthy of a world-class garden. He has grown plants usually considered to be tender, such as *Arum italicum*, *Salvia leucantha*, *Amophophallus riviarsi*, *Vinca major* and *Vinca minor* 'Argentia'. For a number of



Silver Japanese painted fern adds color to Gardenview's shady areas.

years, Henry has watched these plants survive 25 degrees below zero and discredit standard gardening books. "I feel certain my success is due to raising the beds with horse manure and organics. Good drainage is the key to their survival."

Now with his collections established and a magnificent botanical garden thriving, Ross is attempting to make his plans for the future. He searched unsuccessfully nationwide for a gardener with the same selfless love for hands-on gardening to be an apprentice to him and to continue to care for the garden when he is no longer able. "My greatest concern has always been for the perpetuation of Gardenview after I am gone. The single most necessary ingredient to accomplish this is to find a young, dedicated individual to carry on. To this end, I have been trying in

the United States for the past 20 years...to no avail."

Ross feels the problem lies in the American educational system. Graduates are encouraged to seek only positions as foremen, supervisors or directors. The intelligent, capable horticulturist, who might make an ideal craftsman, is discouraged from taking what is looked upon in America as a laborer's job.

Therefore, Henry has begun a campaign to recognize the professional gardener the United States as an artist and craftsman rather than as a common laborer. It is then that we will not only begin to catch up to England but will surpass it the magnificence of our gardens."



Henry Ross keeps his rare variegated *Brunnera* to trade with other collectors for unusual plants. Photos by Susan McClure.



Hosta 'Blue Fountains' is a choice selection.

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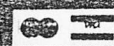
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