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Landscaping the Wright way

The showstopping half-circle “floricycle” at the Martin House features 7,000 early spring bulbs. (Martin House)

By Annette Redican
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Few American architects are held in as high regard as Frank Lloyd Wright—and even fewer regions in our country can claim as rich a Wright legacy as Buffalo-Niagara, home to seven of the finest examples of his venerated portfolio.
Integral to the illustrious master architect’s vision was how he viewed the relationship between architecture and landscape. Wright once observed, “The good building is not one that hurts the landscape, but one which makes the landscape more beautiful than it was before the building was built.”

Two of his most important works, The Martin House in Buffalo and Graycliff Estate in Derby, have undergone years and years of painstaking restoration. Their thoughtful landscapes were rightfully included in the efforts, meticulously reestablished to accurately reflect Wright’s design and ideals.

The Martin House, set on 1.5-acres in the very heart of the historic Parkside neighborhood, epitomizes Frank Lloyd Wright’s Prairie House ideal and is regarded as one of his finest residential works. Beyond the structures, an expansive restoration of his landscape was completed in summer 2019.

Graycliff, commissioned for Isabelle R. Martin as a summer home for the family, is one of the architect’s most compelling designs from the 1920s. It’s comprised of three Wright-designed buildings artfully situated on 8 acres of gardens and grounds perched above a dramatic bluff that drops 65 feet to the water below, affording expansive views of Lake Erie and Canada. Both the dwelling and grounds now appear much as they did when the estate was completed in 1931.

The gardens at both Martin House and Graycliff are designated historic landscapes—and as such, their restorations were shaped by the very specific guidelines that govern these types of rehabilitation.

Bringing the Martin House grounds back to its former glory was a six-year process that began with months of archival research. Mark H. Bayer, founder and principal at Bayer Landscape Architecture, carefully pieced together the complete history of the landscape to create a Martin House Cultural Landscape Report with historic photos, plans and documents. This resource became the foundation for developing a detailed set of landscape rehabilitation plans that guided the two-year rebuilding effort.

The full results of this work, Bayer says, will truly be showcased for the first time this coming spring and summer when over 7,000 thousand bulbs, 2,000 perennials and hundreds of shrubs and trees finally bloom yet again. With this careful recreation of the
landscape, Wright’s full vision for the Martin House property will once again be realized—one where the residence and the landscape are fully and seamlessly integrated.

Horticulturalist Nell Gardner is now charged with ensuring the gardens at both estates are always putting on their best show. She grew up off-the-grid on a Nova Scotia farm situated on resource-poor land in Cape Breton, and eventually attended Cornell to study agronomy with the intent to learn how to best work the challenging environment that was the family farm. However, life came calling with other plans—among them serving as professional agricultural consultant while concurrently renovating multiple historic homes and running a cut-flower business for 25 years.

Gardner originally began her association with the Frank Lloyd Wright properties back in 2006 as the very first volunteer, working in the gardens as well as researching Isabelle Martin’s cut flower gardens. She now spearheads the teams of volunteers whom she readily credits with keeping the estates’ landscapes looking their absolute best throughout the growing season and beyond.

Many current landscape architects contend that Wright, in collaboration with his office manager, landscape architect Walter Burley Griffin and Isabelle Martin, created the most comprehensive landscape of any Wright-designed house when designing the Martin House gardens, notes Gardner. That multifaceted and layered plan unsurprisingly takes a tremendous amount of effort to maintain—especially given the need to work within the established historical guidelines. To ensure it remains consistently at its showy best, she relies on around 30 volunteers who lovingly labor in the dirt in teams of six to 12, usually for a half day on Tuesdays or Thursdays.
At first blush, it may not seem that Western New York gardeners can transplant much in the way of ideas from these extravagant, impeccably designed landscapes. But Gardner contends there is plenty—from techniques for maintenance to suggestions for cultivars that are easy to maintain to simply inspiration—that can be learned from a Frank Lloyd Wright landscape and then applied in a home garden, no matter how modest the plot.

As the pioneer of the organic architecture philosophy, Gardener explains Frank Lloyd Wright’s projects aimed for a balanced relationship between the interiors and exteriors, with the overall design invoking a sense of harmony between the man-made and the natural worlds. Form and function were wholly intertwined, and many elements of his landscapes were designed to invite nature inside.

Frank Lloyd Wright situated the buildings at Martin House to create spaces for gathering or transitional areas. Blurring the lines between indoor and out, planters and urns are built into the structures to give the illusion the houses are dripping plants. Likewise, the presence of nature is strongly felt within the house. Gardner shares that
one doesn’t fully realize the entirety of the Martin House design until immersed in it—and suggests the lesson for fellow gardeners is to consider the landscape an integral part of a home’s overall presentation rather than relegating it to afterthought.

Beyond the stunning recurrent displays, the Frank Lloyd Wright landscapes offer Buffalo green-thumbs the definitive case-study in how the choice of plants, shrubs and trees can ensure a garden looks magical in every season.

At the Martin House, as the weather warms the very early snowdrops emerge—followed by the spring bulbs which, in turn, cede to the magnificence of the peonies, shrubs and trees. The restored “floricycle,” a massive half-circle of plants nestled around the veranda in bloom from mid-April to November, serves up eye-catching appeal when the 7,000 flower bulbs, planted just last fall, dramatically claim their stage.

Summertime sees the garden peak, awash in perennials, roses, hydrangeas and Japanese maples. Come fall, a whole other palette emerges that closely echoes the colors used inside, further blurring the lines between indoors and out.

While there are many lessons to be gleaned for Western New Yorkers who love their gardens, the essence of a Frank Lloyd Wright landscape can be found in an intentional vision for harmony between the house and landscape. In turn, this thoughtful approach is enhanced by carefully combining and layering plant types to ensure visual interest in tribute to the beauty of every season.

**Season-spanning beauty**
A garden is beautiful in the summer, full of blooming annuals, perennials and shrubs. But can your landscape be enjoyed year-round with lots of interesting elements once the blooms have faded? Without a doubt, says horticulturalist Nell Gardner, and examples are grounded at every turn within the Martin House landscape.

“The summer is luxurious, with bountiful flowers and flowing grasses, but winter allows you to see beyond the transient blooms into the layers and details of nature’s beauty that are hidden in the heat of summer,” says Gardner.

**Perennial grasses** are not only great summer accents and useful to hide unwanted things, but they also perform all winter as the seed heads wave in the breeze. Don’t cut them down until spring—it will be easier, plus they’ll be feeding the birds all winter. This also goes for seed heads of coneflowers and sunflowers, too.

The use of **trees with interesting bark** and colorful seeds are also sprinkled throughout the Martin House landscape. Paperbark maple is one of Gardner’s favorites, featuring peeling cinnamon-colored bark. Japanese maples have beautiful shapes and interesting contorted trunks. Spindle trees have bright red fall leaves and beautiful red seeds.
“There are several evergreens at the Martin House that I love,” says Gardner. “A beautifully shaped hemlock with delicate branches elegantly draped with snow. The Swiss Stone pine is upright and soft looking with long needles holding tufts of snow.”

Many shrubs are beautiful in the winter, too. Hydrangeas are used extensively at the Martin House, as well as Itea, spicebush, viburnum and red-twigged dogwood. Gardner says most of the pruning is done in spring so these shrubs, flowers and twigs can be enjoyed all winter.

The “floricycle” contains about 7,000 early spring bulbs, from snowdrops and crocuses to scilla and daffodils. This provides a beautiful show from March through the end of April, Gardner says, and the small bulbs will be a grass-like groundcover after blooming.

Hellebores will also bloom very early, sometimes in the March snow, and not only have beautiful flowers but the foliage later on is also a great garden filler.

And remember, planters near the house can be enjoyed all winter with great combinations of evergreen branches and berried twigs cut from your landscape.

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