

Gardens from a Golden Age

The Tyler Formal Gardens that adorn the Tyler Mansion on the campus of Bucks County Community College are a splendid slice of history that harken back to a golden age of gardening

By Barbara Long



In the Tyler Formal Gardens the first terrace cascades to the second, which originally accommodated the 75-foot-long swimming pool. Inset, Stella Elkins Tyler and George F. Tyler stand in front of their Indian Council Rock

The estate began to take form in 1919 when George and Stella purchased the first of 15 connecting farms in the Newtown-Richboro area. By the time the French-Norman mansion's construction began in 1930, the estate totaled nearly 2,000 acres.

To stroll through the former Tyler mansion and its formal gardens is to step back in time to early twentieth-century estate living and to the Golden Age of American gardening. The stunning property, situated on a hilltop overlooking Neshaminy Creek, was once owned by George F. and Stella Elkins Tyler, and is now home to Bucks County Community College's Newtown campus, currently celebrating its 50th Anniversary. The estate was the only true twentieth-century manor in Bucks County and is believed to have been the last of its kind built in the United States.

Tyler Hall, as the 300-foot long mansion is currently known, is tucked in the far southwest corner of the college campus; and the four-tiered Tyler Formal Gardens, adjacent to and behind the house, cascade down more than 30 feet in elevation toward the woods of Tyler State Park. Their concealed locale, rather than any intent, prompts these significant historic landmarks to be a well-kept secret.

Yet much of the mansion and all of the gardens are accessible whenever the campus is open, and both public and private guided tours are scheduled throughout the year. Indeed, visitors are encouraged to experience this splendid slice of history, which had no equal to its sheer wealth in the county.

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The first terraced level of the gardens reflects many features of upscale early-twentieth-century horticulture: formal hedges, grass panels, gravel pathways, stone walls, water features, statuary, and nearby naturalized landscape.



estate totaled nearly 2,000 acres. Its buildings and landscaping were destined to be exceptional given the socioeconomic status of its owners, and the history of the Tylers is fundamental to appreciating the history of the estate. Both George and Stella were born to well-known and well-heeled families with impressive lineages, and both grew up in a privileged world toward the start of the twentieth century.

George, whose descendants sailed on the Mayflower, was born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1883. He graduated from Harvard, and was a partner in the family brokerage and underwriting firm Montgomery, Clothier & Tyler. He was also a sportsman and philanthropist who, among other positions, served as a director of the Philadelphia National Bank and the Newtown Title and Trust Company, President of the Board of Trustees at Abington Memorial Hospital, and member of the Board of Trustees at Westminster Choir College. In 1935, he and Stella donated their nine-acre, \$1 million estate, Georgian Terrace in Elkins Park, to Temple University for its School of Fine Arts.

Born in 1884, Stella was raised between Philadelphia and Elkins Park, which takes its name from her paternal grandfather, William Lukens Elkins. According to his 1903 obituary in the *New York Times*, he had risen from a grocer's clerk to a multimillionaire as a founding partner of Standard Oil and the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company, among other financial operations. He was also a passionate patron of the arts. Stella, at age 17, opted to skip the debutante conven-

Opposite top, the broad flagstone walkway on the courtyard terrace of the formal gardens connects the orangery to the 300-foot-long mansion. Opposite bottom left, daffodils fill the foreground of the view looking up toward the orangery from the second terrace. Cherry laurel shrubs are planted against the retaining wall. Opposite bottom right, one of two 35-inch-high "Cats" titled *Family Crest* (1932) that were sculpted by Stella Elkins Tyler in her early years as an artist. They were inspired by the demi-cat on the Tyler family crest. Above, colorful irises and tulips underscore the pear tree espalier on the courtyard level during the spring months.



tions of her day and instead travel abroad to study at a private school outside of Paris, becoming well versed in French language and culture. After two years, she returned to the States, and four years later in April 1905, married George. The two moved into their new 50-room home, Georgian Terrace in Elkins Park, which was a wedding gift from Stella's parents. They resided there for 27 years, raising their three children: Sidney, Molly, and George.

Like her grandfather, Stella was a strong supporter of the arts, and she also became an artist in her own right when, nearing age 50, she started sculpting and soon began studying under Boris Blai. Her debut solo art exhibit, held in New York City in April 1935, was favorably reviewed, particularly when measured by the short time she had been developing her talent. Much of Stella's artwork still exists and is on display throughout the mansion, gardens, and college.

With their children grown and no longer living at Georgian Terrace, the Tylers continued to acquire land in Bucks County, and they began to focus on their country retreat. Eventually, the estate became a full-time residence, at which George and Stella began a new chapter in their lives. After George's death in 1947, Stella continued to reside in their Newtown home until 1962.

The original name for the estate, Indian Council Rock, was derived from the time when early Native American tribes gathered to counsel at cliffs on the property. The Tylers elected to build their home near this site, which overlooked Neshaminy Creek and a westerly vista of farmland.

Construction of the French-Norman mansion began in 1930 and continued through 1932. The commission to build the home, service cottages, support buildings, and formal gardens was the largest for Philadelphia's reputable architectural firm Willing, Sims & Talbutt, and is one of the most important examples of its designs. The architecture, particularly the orangery, reveals Stella's passion for all things



Opposite, a corner flower bed on the first terrace that offers an exquisite display of purple Siberian irises. Inset, Stella's *El Cucaracha* (1936). Top, a view of the French-Norman mansion, now known as Tyler Hall, from inside the orangery. Above, *Death and Transfiguration* (1934) by Stella Elkins Tyler stands against the 11-foot retaining wall on the first terrace.

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French.

Charles Willing, a partner in the firm and a well-respected landscape architect, designed the formal gardens, which served as an “outdoor parlor” for entertaining guests, displaying artwork, cultivating plantings, and relaxing outside. Work on the gardens started in 1932 and was completed a few years later.

On the estate, George Tyler enjoyed being a gentleman farmer, hunting fox and pheasant, stabling fine horses, and restarting an abandoned dairy, eventually holding a prize Ayrshire herd. Stella had the former Cooper farmhouse located on the estate renovated for use as a sculpting studio. She was also an avid gardener and frequently experimented with exotic plantings procured while traveling abroad.

A visit to the mansion and formal gardens is well worth the time, as the Tylers spared no expense in building and furnishing their home during the Great Depression. And an impressive amount of the original mansion and gardens has been preserved.

The house’s elegance is equally matched by its setting and landscaping. As Charles Willing was quoted in the program for the 25th annual meeting of the Garden Club of America, “The view from the upper terrace, looking over the river and farmlands, is one never to be forgotten.”

The gardens were built during a time when ultra-wealthy families throughout the United States were hiring renowned landscapers and nurseries to create horticultural showplaces. This time period from the 1890s to 1940s has been referred to as the Golden Age of American Gardens.

Tyler Formal Gardens still display many of the features of these upscale early-twentieth-century gardens: espaliered plantings, sheared hedges, grass panels, gravel pathways, stone walls, water features, statuary, and nearby naturalized landscape. Several of the gardens of this time also included a grass or clay tennis court, as did the Tyler estate.

No matter which level is accessed to

enter Tyler Formal Gardens, the scene gives pause—for the remarkable view, dramatic succession of stone walls, “room within room” design, vibrant flowers, and life-sized bronze statuary.

The courtyard terrace, the most common entryway, offers a birds-eye view of the next two levels and a magnificent panorama of the one-acre landscaped setting. The courtyard’s flagstone walkway connects the dining room at the eastern end of the mansion to the orangery, where Stella stored her citrus trees during cold weather. It is easy to imagine how, in summer months, Stella lined the walkway with these trees that were kept in large cedar planters.

The first terraced level, the most formal of the tiers, was also the most damaged by time and lack of upkeep. It also reflects the most restoration, including new boxwood and yew hedges; sodded grass panels; an array of colorful perennials; refurbished gravel pathways delineated with steel edging; and installed replicas of a white marble bench and two doorway gates, the original of which were designed by Samuel Yellin, one of the twentieth century’s foremost metalworkers.

On various levels of the gardens, Stella’s statues heighten the gardens’ uniqueness and style as well as enhance the horticultural display, which in early June presents four corner beds of exquisite purple Siberian irises in full bloom.

The gazebo on the second terraced level is not original in structure or placement. The original creation was perched on the hill outside the gardens, offering a spectacular view of Neshaminy Creek. As attested by the two bathhouses, constructed in the same stone and style as the Tyler mansion, this second level once accommodated the 75-foot-long swimming pool.

Peering over the south stone wall of this terrace reveals the fourth level, previously the site of a red clay tennis court. This rectangular area, now a grass lawn, is framed by a low stone wall in which remains of the metal poles for the tennis court fencing are still visible.

When Stella died in 1963, Temple University received, as she had willed, 200 acres of the estate that included the mansion and gardens. The remaining acreage was sold to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to become Tyler State Park. In 1964, Temple sold its inherited tract to the Bucks County Authority for the site of a new community college, which opened in the fall of 1965.

With the transformation of the estate’s function from private to public, the swimming pool was filled in and converted to a lawn. And with the absence of Stella’s full-time gardening staff, the formal gardens began to slide into serious disrepair.

The wisteria that Stella had planted to add color and playfully climb the stone walls was now free to wildly proliferate, while the previously sheared hedges mushroomed into strange shapes, and many plantings were wiped out by weeds. By the 1970s, the formal gardens were anything but.

Periodically, various volunteers organized garden cleanups, particularly after the mansion and gardens became listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. Yet the efforts, while earnest, seemed to be a dance of one step forward and two steps back. Then in 1999, a longterm plan was advanced by Lyle Rosenberger and Kathi Knight, both Bucks professors, to restore the gardens as closely as possible to their glorious past.

“When Lyle and I first met at a new student advising session in 1999, we talked about the mansion’s restoration and agreed that the formal gardens needed attention as well,” said Knight. “One of the first efforts was to design the Restoration of Historic Gardens course. And while that was underway, Lyle was able to procure some funds from the [college’s] Foundation and the project began.”

Due to the ephemerality of plantings and a number of key changes since the early days of the gardens, including fewer garden workers and public versus private usage, some adaptations have been required of the gardens’ restoration to their

heyday.

Knight noted, “Since we had the original landscape plan, we were able to plant the boxwood and yew borders as depicted in that plan. However, the flower beds are a less stringent interpretation of Stella’s vision, as I believe that she had a good deal of rose plantings, but that was before the influx of Japanese beetles.”

Year by year, formality and structure have been reinstated in the gardens. And the Tyler Gardens Panel, a small but dedicated group of volunteers, ensures that restoration efforts continue to progress.

Thanks to the Herculean efforts and generosity of many, the gardens once again exhibit their former splendor, giving visitors a taste of early twentieth-century horticulture as practiced by the “rich and famous” of that time. In the case of Tyler Formal Gardens, it is not a cliché to call their restoration a labor of love, and an ongoing labor at that.

“We have been very fortunate in the past 15 years during which hundreds of volunteers have contributed more than 8,000 hours to these gardens,” Rosenberger offered. “We appreciate each effort given by this spirited ‘army,’ which with endless determination, has restored and maintained a garden gem from the 1930s.”

Education has always been the first priority of the college, and no tuition payments are spent on restoring the mansion or its gardens. Yet the college’s administrators and constituents recognize their role as caretakers of this distinguished and unique historic property. To assist in preserving this slice of history, the Bucks County Community College Foundation, along with its Preservation Committee and other volunteers, organize fundraisers, such as the annual Tasting Party and the Tyler Formal Gardens & Landscape Lecture; solicit donations, including to the Stella Elkins Tyler Gardens Endowment; and seek grants to cover the costs of restoration projects.

“Over the last 26 years, thousands of people have supported our efforts to preserve this beautiful building by attending

our annual food and wine tasting event, enjoying a guided tour, or taking photographs in the beautiful gardens,” said Tobi Bruhn, the Foundation’s Executive Director. “All of the investments made into this historic landmark, which total over \$1 million to date, are complemented by the students and faculty of our Historic Preservation program, which provide expert advice and skills for our many projects that further enhance the building’s charm and ambiance.”

More frequently the gardens are being enjoyed by college students and personnel, horticulturists, artists, naturalists, tourists, and local residents just stopping by. Understandably, the gardens are also popular for taking photos. Wedding party and other professional photographers are asked to register with the college’s Security Department before setting up shoots.

The former Tyler estate is indeed significant on many accounts: historical, architectural, horticultural, and artistic. Yet the site is also, quite simply, a picturesque and tranquil setting in which to spend time.

Tyler Formal Gardens hark back to a historical era of exceptional private elegance; they also greet the future, continually being preserved as a magnificent public space beckoning and educating generations to come.

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