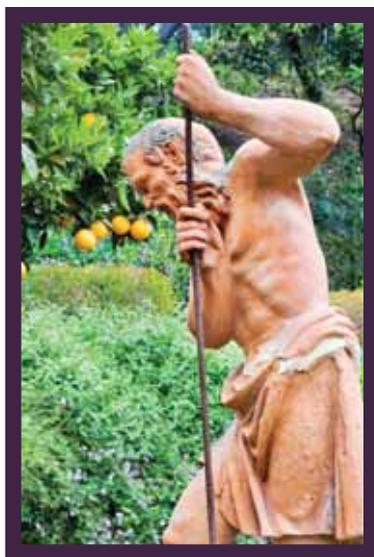


The Tropical Palm Grove features the largest collection of Australian King Palms in the continental United States. The trunks of the magnificent trees soar 50 to 60 feet high.



# *the* Secretly Spectacular Gardens of Virginia Robinson

Beverly Hills' "First Lady" Bequeaths Her Legacy for All to Enjoy

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**B**everly Hills, California, the hillside enclave that sits just above Sunset Boulevard, has long been famous for its movie stars and opulent homes. Its fascinating history dates back to 1906, when the Rodeo Land and Water Company financed the planning of the fashionable community and hired the Olmsted Brothers—landscape designers of the White House grounds and New York City's Central Park—to lay out its elegant palm-tree-lined streets. To this day, they remain highly private.

But there is one notable exception: The historic 7-acre estate of Virginia Robinson sits right in the heart of Beverly Hills, open for everyone's enjoyment. Ironically, it's one of the

least-known private gardens in the United States, and yet its elegant mix of Italianate architecture, formal European landscape design, and a jungle of rare tropical and subtropical plants makes it one of the most magnificent—a horticultural fantasyland for the lucky visitor today.

This legendary estate was built in 1911, after Virginia Dryden married J.W. Robinson's department store heir Harry Robinson, and the newlyweds returned from a three-year honeymoon to Europe, India, and Kashmir. Virginia's father was noted architect Nathaniel Dryden, who designed their dream home on what was then 15 acres of undeveloped land.

Virginia and Harry moved into their 6,000-square-foot

beaux-arts residence in 1912—the first home to be built in Beverly Hills. Within only a few years, The Beverly Hills Hotel would appear, and neighbors including John and Ethel Barrymore, Gloria Swanson, the elusive Greta Garbo, and many other famous stars of the early American cinema would gradually join the couple and become their friends.

During her lifetime, Mrs. Robinson worked closely with the celebrated Pasadena landscape architect Charles Gibbs Adams to build five distinct gardens, dramatically situated around a Mediterranean-style palazzo on a steep, terraced hillside. Each garden contains a rich tapestry of unusual plant material influenced by the couple's extensive travels in Europe.

To reach the main gardens, visitors pass through the residence and glimpse a view of the gracious formal Mall, built in the character of an English walled garden, with herbaceous borders, manicured lawns, and classical statuary. Pathways lead to a balustrade-flanked swimming pool next to a Renaissance-style Pool Pavilion, added in 1924. On the east side of the Pavilion sits a small rose garden. Roses were Virginia's favorite flowers, and this intimate space has a charming and abundant collection of old English and hybrid tea roses.

To the west of the Pavilion are the Italianate Gardens, with brilliant views of specimen trees including giant firs and Italian cypresses. Exotics and subtropical plants were Mrs. Robinson's specialty, which she imported and planted on the steeply raked plot. Eight decorative stone terraces connected by brick paths are scented by gardenias and stephanotis and

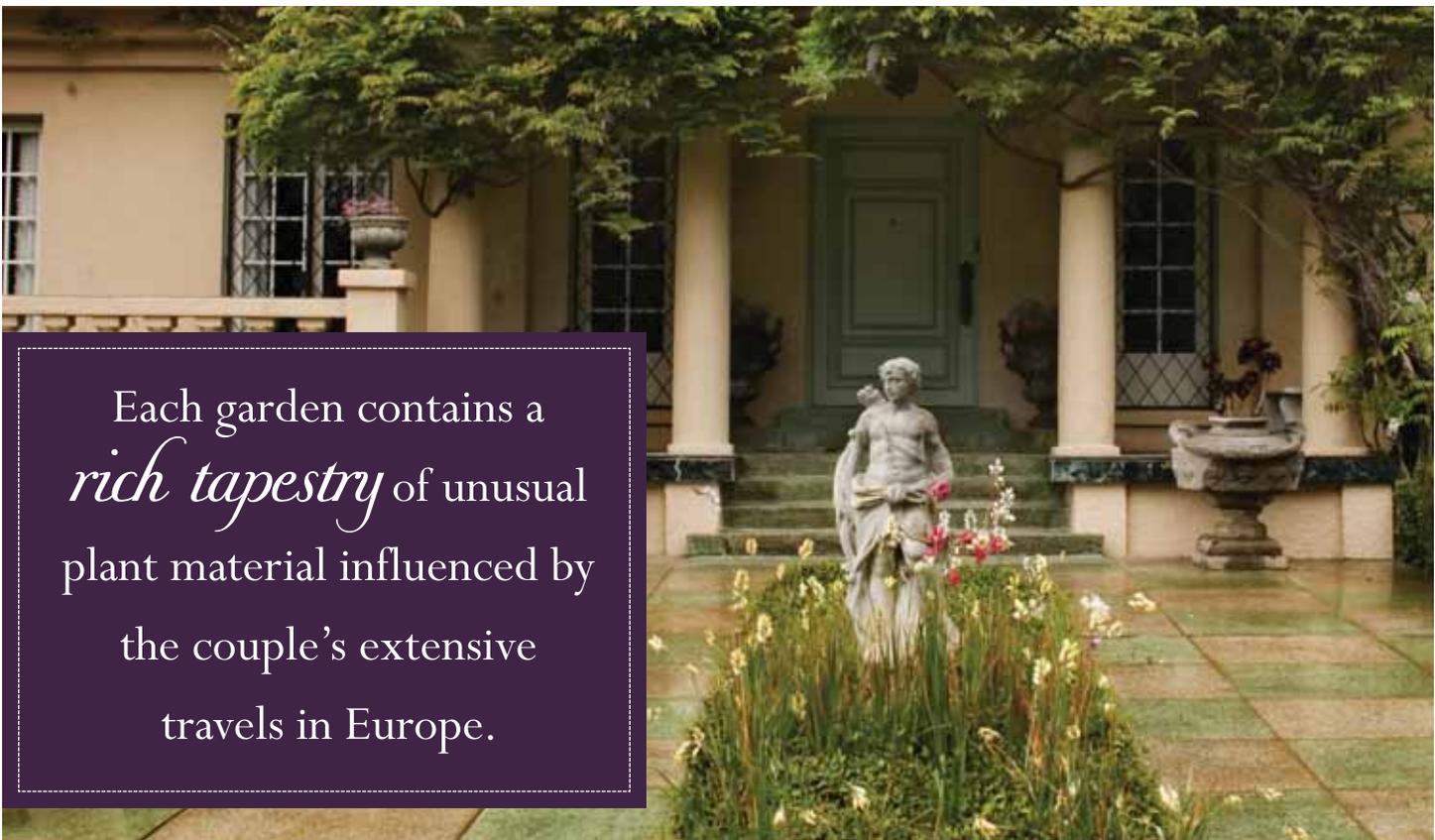
enhanced by secret fountains, ponds, and statuary placed whimsically amid densely leafed trees.

In a classical French Potager Garden, vegetables and herbs are planted in pattern. Curiously, bird and monkey cages sit at one end of the potager. The story goes that pet monkeys roamed free for a time, but after biting several guests they were confined to cages, where Mrs. Robinson consoled them with sugar lumps soaked in bourbon before she visited her extensive aviary, filled with exotic parrots and macaws.

The most dramatic feature of the Robinson Gardens is its Tropical Palm Grove. Cool, shady paths wind through a cathedral-like forest of giant ferns, tropical plants, and the largest collection of Australian King Palms in the continental United States, with trunks that soar 50 or 60 feet high. Visitors are treated to a spectacular open-air view of the palm forest by standing on the balcony-like loggia. With no fourth wall and mirrors on two facing walls that reflect the tops of the palms as they wave in the breeze, this amazing vantage point exaggerates a feeling of floating in space, magically suspended above the tree line.

Though she died in 1977, she bequeathed the estate to Los Angeles County in 1974. Today, the garden and residence are operated by the Department of Parks and Recreation under the careful direction of Tim Lindsay, who has a rich horticultural and forestry background and came to the Gardens from the Los Angeles County Arboretum.

Lindsay initially became involved during a time when a



Each garden contains a *rich tapestry* of unusual plant material influenced by the couple's extensive travels in Europe.



TOP: The Renaissance-style Pool Pavilion was added to the property in 1924.

former director was ill, and he remembers being drawn to the serenity and tranquility of the estate. “It feels like you are in Italy during the Italian Renaissance,” he says, “surrounded by the architecture, sounds, and smells of the 17th century.”

But when he arrived, the property was in neglected condition and “headed in the wrong direction in terms of plant palette and use of the plants,” the director remembers. “None of the water features worked, and the Italian Terrace Garden was not sunny as intended, but a shade garden because of overgrowth.” It took Lindsay and his staff a full year to sort through the trees, which needed to be drastically scaled back and, in some cases, edited out.

The restoration work has been difficult, without the benefit of knowing Mrs. Robinson or having a formal plan to consult.

But today, Lindsay’s team has been successful in restoring more than 80 percent of the garden to its original grandeur. Thousands of photographs have been consulted, and Lindsay is careful to edit or add only what he thinks would have appealed to Mrs. Robinson. Fortunately, her last major d’omo (house manager, still living on the premises) has shared important memories about the function, look, and use of the garden during the last ten years of Mrs. Robinson’s life.

Lindsay is passionate about providing future directors with a blueprint for ongoing preservation. “Each new director will have a better understanding and will know exactly what to do to preserve the Virginia Robinson legacy for future generations to view and enjoy.” ■