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## HEROES OF HORTICULTURE

### AMERICANS WHO TRANSFORMED THE LANDSCAPE

by **KATHRYN BOUGHTON**

The magic of gardening has engrossed gardening author Barbara Paul Robinson since the days when, as a young mother, she and her husband, Charles, purchased a bedraggled 1750 farmhouse in Washington CT.

“My husband grew up in the country and I didn’t,” she explained. “We were weekenders, we had small children, I was working—it’s insane what you do when you are young. We were working on restoring the house to make it livable, taking out windows, scraping paint, pulling down ceilings, while outdoors there were what had been tough fields of gravel and stone that had reverted to scrubby fields.”

Robinson, who describes herself as a “tidier,” decided that those fields needed to be cleaned up. “My husband wanted to cut the trees,” Robinson recalled.

“I didn’t want to cut the trees,” she said, describing her failed attempt to forestall their removal. “I think I will have a chapter called *The Clearances* in my next book—which will describe “how all this craziness took hold of me” she said, tongue in cheek. The Clearances did uncover a rickety old fence that her husband immediately identified as the location of an old vegetable garden and he pounced on the opportunity to recreate it.

“He turned the soil by hand—no rototiller for him—and planted a vegetable garden,” she said. “Then the bank he worked for then sent him to Brazil for a month. There I am, alone, driving my little babies up here. I went out to keep an eye on the vegetables and there were these little green things coming out of the ground. I had never seen seeds germinate. I thought it was a miracle. I was so excited I called him in Brazil.”

Robinson said that growing healthy food for her family seemed practical, but “little by little flowers crept in. Slowly by slowly, like a disease, flowers took over.”



#### Upcoming Events

May 4, 2019 - May 12, 2019

Mamma Mia!  
Warner Theatre

May 4, 2019

Spring Spirits  
Litchfield Jazz and  
Litchfield Distillery

May 8, 2019

Craig Ferguson - Riding the  
Elephant  
Fisher Center for the  
Performing Arts at Bard

May 10, 2019 - May 12, 2019

Exercising Mind & Body  
With Essentrics  
Omega Institute

HOME STYLE

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INTERIOR DESIGN

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LANDSCAPE  
DESIGN

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LIFESTYLE

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LODGING

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MOSTLY FOR MEN

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ADVENTURES

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PERFORMING  
ARTS

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PERSONAL STYLE

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Robinson, who joined the law firm of Debevoise & Plimpton in 1966 and became its first female partner in 1976, soon found that gardening provided surcease from her busy weeks. “For a lawyer, it’s very tangible—hands-on tangible,” she said. “And plants don’t argue with you, there’s now contention. They don’t say, ‘You thought I was a tomato? Watch this. Today I will be a rose.’ There are no words. It’s quiet. It’s a great thing.”

When she received a five-month sabbatical from the law firm, she decided to use the opportunity to explore gardening more fully. “I thought I was just tumbling along, self-taught, and I thought I could use the time to get some serious gardening training.”

She found she did not have enough time to undertake a serious course of study, as most required two years, and that she was, by then, too old to apply. Then a friend suggested she apply to work in one of the great gardens in the world. “I wrote shamelessly to two of the most famous gardeners in the world, Rosemary Veery and Penelope Hobhouse, and asked if could work in their gardens for free. Both said yes.”

Veery and Hobhouse were both garden designers, authors and lecturers and, after her death, Veery would become the subject of Robinson’s own first book.

Veery, who created the famous garden at Barnsley House, near Cirencester, England, demanded an interview before committing to the internship. Robinson survived the interview with an imperious Veery—whose last question was, “Are you prepared to be treated like staff?”—and left for a month to live in a ‘freezing cold cottage.”

“It was so terrific,” she reported. “I learned I knew more than I thought I did—but that there is always so much more to learn. Then I worked for Penny for couple of weeks.”

The internships resulted in long-lasting friendships. “When Rosemary died, I wanted to tell her story. She was amazing. She came to gardening late in life and wrote her first book at 62—and then went on to write 17 more. It shows that you can have a whole new thing late in life.”

Robinson, who is enjoying her own late-blooming recognition as a gardening author, Robinson will speak about her new book Sunday, April 28th, at Hotchkiss Library as part of its Sundays at 4 series. Registration is requested by calling the library at 860-364-5041.

The book on Veery started Robinson on her literary career. Last year she published her second book, *Heroes of Horticulture, Americans who Transformed the Landscape*, which has received glowing reviews.

The book tells the stories of 18 institution builders, plant explorers and garden creators who have had a major impact on the landscape. The book profiles those who were essential to the creation of The Garden Conservancy, the restoration and enhancement of public parks and public spaces and the revitalization and establishment of botanical and other public gardens.

Robinson said all the persons picked for profiles “had an impact on the public. Each in his or her way has made a difference for the public. And they all had to be people I loved. It’s a very contemporary history—all but two are living and the two who are not were with us until recently.”

Included in the book is a section on “plant finders,” nurserymen who go off to remote parts of the world to find unknown plants and bring them back. In a world where invasive plants are an increasing problem, Robinson said the plantsmen are “incredible environmentalists.”

“They are careful about not taking away from the environment that they are in and they are dedicated to testing to make sure the plants are

May 11, 2019

Grant & Twain  
Barrington Stage Company

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May 12, 2019 - May 17, 2019

Wisdom Healing Qigong  
Omega Institute

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May 12, 2019

Spring Choral Concert  
The Hotchkiss School

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May 15, 2019

The Naumburg Trio  
Tannery Pond Concerts

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May 17, 2019

The Mystical 16: Psalm 116  
in Renaissance, Baroque &  
Contemporary Settings  
Crescendo

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May 17, 2019 - May 19, 2019

A Weekend with Pema  
Chodron  
Omega Institute

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May 18, 2019

David Finckel & Wu Han  
Tannery Pond Concerts

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May 18, 2019 - May 19, 2019

Salisbury Artisans Group  
Market  
The White Hart Inn

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## Ongoing Events

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November 10, 2018 - May  
27, 2019

Frank E. Schoonover:  
American Visions  
Norman Rockwell Museum

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February 1, 2019 - May 5,  
2019

Objects and Their Stories:  
Oral Histories from the  
NAACP  
Berkshire Muesum

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March 1, 2019 - June 1, 2019

Suffering from Realness  
MASS MoCA

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March 2, 2019 - June 9, 2019

The Art of Wit and Rube  
Goldberg  
Norman Rockwell Museum

not invasive. Most invasive plants have been brought in by the federal government and these guys are a model for what the government should properly do.”

The sumptuous book owes much to her publisher. “My publisher [David R. Godine] is terrific,” she said. “He loves beautiful books. He told me this book needed to have beautiful images in each story and needs to be affordable. So he sent it to China to be printed but he insisted the printer send back copies of the pages before they printed. The images really were done right, even though I am sorry it took so long.”



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