

Title:

Loving Long Island-Day Trips

Word Count:

1940

Summary:

If you were to say to someone in Maine that you were taking the ferry to Long Island to visit public gardens, they would look at you and think, "What public gardens?" They would conjure up images of an outpost in Casco Bay populated by people who fish for a living and have little time to garden, and by summer residents who might have a small vegetable garden, flower bed or hedgerow of rugosa rose. But public gardens? There are none to be found. It's a simple place where the w...

Keywords:

garden tours,gardens,gardening,organic,long island,new york

Article Body:

If you were to say to someone in Maine that you were taking the ferry to Long Island to visit public gardens, they would look at you and think, "What public gardens?" They would conjure up images of an outpost in Casco Bay populated by people who fish for a living and have little time to garden, and by summer residents who might have a small vegetable garden, flower bed or hedgerow of rugosa rose. But public gardens? There are none to be found. It's a simple place where the word "ostentatious" isn't used very often. I like Long Island, Maine – my kind of people and my kind of gardens.

Last year, I was asked to go to the "other" Long Island, the big island adjacent to New York City, for a Day Trip. Never having been there – and based on some of the things I had read about the Hamptons, the area I would be visiting – I really wasn't looking forward to it. Who wants to drive all day, take a ferry, then drive some more to see "McMansions" or rub elbows in an overpriced restaurant with high rollers from New York City? I did make the trip, however, and although it was quite different from Long Island, Maine, it wasn't what I had envisioned.

I had a little time to kill before taking the ferry from New London, Conn., so I took a moment to see the newly completed Athenian garden in a pocket park downtown. With a Greek-inspired mural and sculptures, it was well worth the visit. If you have more time to spend in New London, a half-day visiting the

Connecticut College Arboretum also is a must.

The ferry ride across Long Island Sound to Orient Point proved pleasant aboard the 1,000-passenger MV John H. There were many interesting sights, including lighthouses and the Electric Boat shipyard in Groton, Conn., where sub-marines are built and maintained for the U.S. Navy. One of the subs passed the ferry – something I had never seen in Casco Bay!

Disembarking from the ferry, I was ready for the glitz and glitter of Long Island. The first hour of driving, however, was through rural farming areas in Suffolk County, the leading agricultural county in New York. Tomatoes were ripe on the vine and potatoes were being dug. After another ferry ride from Shelter Island, I pulled into Bridgehampton, where BMWs, Jaguars and Mercedes replaced the John Deere tractors of an hour earlier.

No celebrities were sighted, but I was immediately taken by the miles of privet hedges, *Ligustrum* spp., most of them sculpted to sharp angles. They delineated property lines and prevented anyone from seeing through them or over them. I became fascinated with the hedges and tried to seek out Vincent Simone, a local woody-plant expert whose books I reviewed this year in PPP's Early Spring issue. Unfortunately, I was unable to contact him until I returned to Maine (see the sidebar at left). On every road I traveled, pruning crews high on ladders used power hedge trimmers to sculpt the naturally gangly privet into something that looked almost perfect. Back in Maine on Long Island, a privet hedge might only get pruned once a year, and sometimes that would be with a chain saw.

I soon arrived at the Madoo Conservancy in Sagaponack and the gardens of Robert Dash, who probably is best known as an artist whose medium is canvas. I quickly found that this multi-talented character – I was going to use the term "gentleman," but I knew he would disapprove – had an uncanny eye for developing landscapes.

"I do not paint in the way that I garden

or garden as I would employ the brush, although the process is often the same – both are arts of the wrist, the broadest, largest sort of signature, if you will, highly idiosyncratic, the result of much doing, much stumbling, and highly intuited turns and twists before everything fits and adheres to the scale of one's intention," Dash wrote in Notes from Madoo: Making a Garden in the Hamptons (see Book Reviews on Page 132). I felt there could be no better representation of his art than that of his gardens.

In May of 1965, Dash first saw the land that was to become his passion. He

bought the parcel – a raw piece of agricultural land with an 18th-century hay barn – and by 1967 was on his way to creating Madoo, which in an old Scottish dialect means “my dove.”

Upon my arrival he quickly took me to his gardens, which were designed as a series of rooms. We strolled past the boxwoods of the knot garden and down the rose walk, which features a brick-lined rill. My eye was drawn through hoops entwined with climbing roses to an exedra, a Grecian brick structure with an oculus and a linear mirror to extend the sightline. This was just the first of many garden designs befitting an artist. I have seen ginkgo groves, for instance, but none that utilize tightly pruned boxwoods, or “box balls,” as Dash’s does.

“Rather a wild stroke,” he said.

We passed four quincunx beds, with a fastigiate yew standing at attention at each corner of each square bed. There was a hermit’s hut tucked into another garden, and Dash proudly showed me an oriental bridge surrounded by native plants. As we walked, he explained that the keys to successful growing are lots of manure and proper pruning.

Pruning? I was looking for privet that didn’t look perfectly square, and I found what I wanted. Dash has taken mature privet and treated it in a way that will provide an opportunity for all gardeners with overgrown hedges – an opportunity to make a statement with plants that will have visitors saying “wow,” as I did. Imagine 20-foot-tall privets – with trunks the size of small trees – pruned up a good 10 feet.

“Now aged and knobby, they still look like the legs of young ballerinas, but young ballerinas wearing old rehearsal stockings, pilled and raddled,” Dash wrote in describing the effect.

After walking through his many other garden rooms, it was time to have a glass of wine. The wine led to a discussion of what needs to be changed at Madoo, and the amount of grape juice consumed may have influenced the fate of the knot garden. We agreed that it interfered with the view down the rill to the exedra, and it must go!

Running late, I reluctantly left Madoo and arrived at the LongHouse Reserve just as it was closing for the day. A busload of visitors was being escorted out, which allowed for a look at the gardens without anyone else present, and the setting sun created lighting conditions that couldn’t have been better for photography. But being late also meant I didn’t get to spend much time with

Matko Tomicic, the executive director, or any time with Jack Lenor Larsen, who created this wonderful landscape filled with works by artists ranging from Roy Lichtenstein to Yoko Ono.

Garden enthusiasts come to LongHouse not so much for the plant collections as for ambitious landscaping, and for a variety of spaces sometimes referred to as outdoor rooms. Among them are the Red Garden, the Dune Garden, the Grass Garden and the Lotus Pond, in addition to several allées. LongHouse receives about 6,000 visitors annually.

About 300 daffodil cultivars blossom in April and May, primarily in whites and pinks. The property also features 60 bamboo cultivars, ranging from low pygmies to combs 50 feet high; 100 conifer varieties, and 100 ornamental grasses.

The sculptures at LongHouse provide punctuation – and a destination. While many visitors might not want to walk the equivalent of several blocks to see a new tree, they are often willing to visit the Yoko Ono piece at the west boundary of the reserve, or to experience a new or famous work, including pieces in glass and ceramic by Toshiko Takaezu and Dale Chihuly.

While this garden art may be out of reach financially for many of PPP's readers, the concept can be transposed to most landscapes. LongHouse can inspire gardeners to go beyond the ordinary and take the chances necessary to make a landscape unique.

Another public garden in the area that is well worth mentioning is the Bridge Gardens Trust. The gardens had closed for the season the day before I arrived, but curator Harry Neyens was gracious enough to provide a description.

"Bridge Gardens Trust has 800 antique and new roses, a knot garden, a historical collection of culinary, medicinal, textile and dyeing herbs, a lavender parterre, an assortment of topiaries, a water garden, two shade gardens, a bamboo grove and specimen plantings," he said. "(We receive) 1,500 visitors annually."

The next time I visit Long Island, I'll make certain I get there before the closing date of Oct. 31!

If you enjoy visiting wineries, there are many on Long Island from which to choose. The soil (a rich loam), the climate (like Bordeaux) and the influence of the ocean all make for perfect grape-growing. A stop at the Wölffer Estate Vineyard in Sagaponack proved how well-suited Long Island is for winemaking. The Wölffer Estate Selection Chardonnay was rated "Best Long Island Chardonnay" by The Wine Enthusiast magazine. Even if you are not a fan of wine, the landscape

and vineyard running alongside the winery make a stop here worthwhile.

There are many options for accommodations in the Hamptons, from bed-and-breakfast establishments to motels. I opted to head out to Montauk on the easternmost tip of Long Island. The town has an old summer beach community feel, with many old-style motels and 5,000 acres of public beaches to enjoy. It also has a lot of history: The Montauk Point Lighthouse was opened in 1787, and Montauk Point is where Teddy Roosevelt and his 30,000 Rough Riders landed after the Spanish-American War.

There are a host of excellent places to eat in Montauk, and I asked around about the best place to sample local fare. The locals all steered me to the Shagwong Restaurant, and a meal of freshly caught seafood proved their recommendations correct.

What is my most lasting memory of this Day Trip? The eccentricity of Robert Dash, the privet hedges, the sun setting behind the Chihuly glass wands at the LongHouse Reserve, or sunrise at Montauk Point? None of the above. As memorable as these experiences were, they can't beat my visit to Marders Nursery.

For a tree lover, nothing can compare to sitting on the rootball of a 20-foot ginkgo ready to be installed at the cost of \$25,000. Yes, \$25,000! This nursery in Bridgehampton is beyond belief. It was started by Kathleen and Charlie Marder about a quarter of a century ago with the purpose of transplanting large trees by mechanical means. That they do, and in addition to the large trees they now have a full-service garden center, a landscaping division and an art collection on the grounds. If you need a large plant to anchor your landscape, visit them and ask to see the 40-foot arborvitae. If you think it will fit in your landscape, get the checkbook ready, because for about \$40,000 it can be yours. And, of course, if Marders plants the tree, it comes with a two-year guarantee.

It was time to head back to Maine. Had I changed my mind about which Long Island I like best? Maybe, but I'll have to visit the New York one a couple of more times to fairly judge. Of course, if someone bought me one of those \$25,000 ginkgos there would be no contest!