

Early American Gardens

A Long Garden Legacy - By Bonnie R. Hansen – Santa Fe Trail Garden Club

Few gardens can compare with those of the rich and famous. Pierre du Pont created Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania, and cement magnate Robert Pim Buchart started the garden that bears his name in British Columbia. Kansas City had a multimillionaire with gardens, too. In 1912, lumber baron R.A. Long built Kansas City's first million-dollar home, a 70-room Beaux Arts mansion called Corinthian Hall. It was famous for its gardens, greenhouse and conservatory.



Behind the mansion, a wisteria-draped pergola was lined by clay pots filled with ornamental trees. The greenhouse was a riot of purple and white petunias in late winter, which were started indoors and transplanted to more than a dozen cut-stone planters in spring. The planters were perched atop 7-foot pedestals which surrounded the property at 30-foot intervals. In summer, the planters were adorned with geraniums and trailing ivy, and in fall they shone with bronze and golden mums. The surrounding grounds were laid out in formal displays of annuals.

Today, the property is the home of the Kansas City Museum. Most of the grandeur of the garden is gone, but Corinthian Hall is still worth visiting, especially in springtime when the ancient wisteria still blooms on the recently-restored pergola. A stand of iris also thrives in front of the old stable. It's believed that these flowers are descended from the originals planted by Loula Long Combs, Mr. Long's youngest daughter and famed equestrian "Queen of the American Royal".



The crowning glory of the property is a pair of elaborately-ornamented marble urns, each seven feet tall, which frame the front entrance. They are a fitting first impression for this historic home.

I volunteered to plant the large pedestal planters and urns – a job which required ladders and courage! The Shawnee Mission Garden Club provided beautiful wholesale plants, grown by horticulture students at K-State. That spring the planters brimmed with ivy geraniums, and spilled over with golden marguerite sweet potato vines and deep wine million bells. By summer the giant elephant ears emerged creating a bold impact worthy of Corinthian Hall.



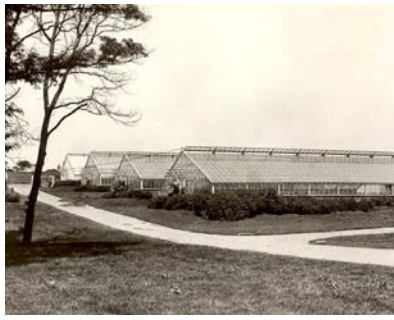
About the same time he was building his mansion in town, Mr. Long set his sights on a country estate. Characteristically, he spared no expense, and according to one magazine, the result was “the world’s most beautiful farm.” Dubbed Longview Farm, it was a demonstration project that raised prize hogs and Jersey cows. It was also a place for R.A. Long and daughter Loula to indulge their passion for horses and dogs.

But Longview was also noted for its beautiful grounds. A huge sunken garden created a dramatic entry to the mansion, and the house itself was dripping with formal window boxes and planters. A rose walk arbor led to a pergola even more dramatic than the one at Corinthian Hall, and like its urban cousin, it was covered with wisteria. A large lily pond completed the pastoral scene.

Twenty-five miles of whitewashed fencing enclosed the 1780-acre property, and a staff of full-time gardeners planted the grounds lavishly. “Mrs. Combs was especially fond of iris,” according to Linda Mason, author of *The Longview We Remember*. “She even employed the children of the farm workers in little garden chores, and rewarded them with ice cream and quarters. She affectionately called them her ‘termites,’ and one of their main tasks was to divide her iris beds.”

Cut flowers were sold in Kansas City markets, especially roses, carnations, and gardenias. The Long’s cut roses were awarded blue ribbons in the 1925 National Flower Show. The winning roses included Columbia, a hybrid Tea from 1923 with medium pink blooms and strong fragrance. Madame Butterfly, another winner, was a hybrid tea from 1918, an apricot blend with light pink. Additional winners included Premier, a Hybrid tea, large flowered from 1918 with medium red blooms and, Milady, a hybrid tea from 1913 described as deep pink, crimson-scarlet blooms, strong fragrance and a large double, full bloom form.

Mrs. Combs liked to wear a gardenia corsage to church every week, and she always wore an orchid in the show ring at the American Royal, both of which were grown in their massive greenhouse complex. One rose house contained 48,000 rose plants and a large carnation house held 65,000 plants. All in all it was 20 acres under glass.



Today the Longview mansion and sunken gardens have been lovingly restored by developer Gale Communities, which also plans to refurbish the pergola and ponds. Frequently used for weddings, the mansion and grounds are the height of elegance from a bygone era.

Bonnie Hansen was the Executive Producer for an award winning PBS Documentary “Ours to Give – The Long Legacy of an American Family”. She is a popular local speaker on fashion, gardening, and women’s history.