



Unison Preservation Society
NEWSLETTER
Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside

Unison garden.
Courtesy of Sandy Wilson

VOL. 9 • ISSUE TWO • 2022

• SPRING •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

Gardening in Place Around Unison

By Sandy Wilson

After successful careers as communication lawyers in Washington, Sandy Wilson and her husband, Bob Pettit, moved to Unison over ten years ago. An avid gardener all her life, Sandy decided to make a dramatic career shift and became a landscape designer. A particular interest is “gardening-in-place”, as she calls it. We asked her to explain this concept in the following article using her own garden as an example. Additional pictures of Sandy and Bob’s garden can be found at a-peaceable-garden.com.



Perhaps this will sound familiar: You own a beautiful multi-acre property in the rolling hills of horse country around the village of Unison. You love to garden. You’ve got the room to create all kinds of elaborate flower beds around your property. You’re energetic and full of ideas. But. You know you’re not getting any younger. You want to keep gardening as you age (after all, it’s really, really good for you). How do you future-proof your yard so it continues to be source of delight without overwhelming your physical capabilities?

My husband Bob and I have been grappling with this question since we moved to the Unison area a decade ago. Like most of our friends (and the vast majority of Baby Boomers), we plan to age in place. This beautiful old homestead is our “forever” home. The house has been renovated to (eventually) accommodate things like walkers and wheelchairs. But what about the grounds? Here are some of the ideas we’ve incorporated into our own garden to help us strike the right balance over time.

GETTING AROUND THE GARDEN

The beauty of a garden can be so distracting (Look! A peony!) that it’s easy to forget the importance of moving smoothly around your yard without encountering dangerous obstacles. Take

Our old dog, Duff, whom we adopted from Middleburg Humane, approved of the wide and smooth front walk as do our human guests. Our front walk not only signals that this is the way to the front door but immediately puts you in the middle of our front garden.

an inventory of your hardscape with your future older self in mind. Are the front and back paths into your house wide and smooth enough to walk comfortably? Are they well-lit at night? Are there steep or slippery stairs that need railings? Are any hard surfaces too bright and reflective for older eyes? Are there places to sit in both sun and shade?

The best test for me of whether my garden measures up has been watching my 90+ year old mom maneuver around it. If I see her get stuck, I know there's an accessibility issue that needs to be resolved well before I reach her age.

KEEPING THINGS CLOSE

One of my first ideas when we moved to Unison was to put a beautiful garden in front of a split rail fence about 200 feet away from our back entrance. Thank goodness I reconsidered. As I tell my clients, there is no such thing as a “no maintenance” garden. The thought of schlepping water, weed debris, garden tools



ABOVE: One of the hardest things for gardeners is learning how to just sit and enjoy the fruits of their labor. These Adirondack chairs outside our back door make it easy to take in the sights and sounds of the garden with a cup of coffee or a glass of wine.



and other items that far away would be daunting to me now. It certainly wouldn't get any easier as the years progress.

I chose instead to keep the traditional garden close. Our two main perennial beds are right outside our front door and right outside our back door. They're easy to get to and easy to see from inside the house (even from a possible sickbed). We enjoy looking at them every day—and our guests get to admire them too.

KEEPING THINGS NARROW

Like many avid gardeners, I've always dreamed of having an English “long border” that is crammed full of gorgeous blossoms throughout the growing season. But again: large flowers borders are not exactly low maintenance.

Rather than give up on the idea of an English flower garden entirely, I opted instead to keep my borders narrow: a maximum of 5-6 feet wide. I've discovered you can still pack a lot of visual punch into such a relatively small space. Maintenance

LEFT: Not only is this garden right behind the house but it is only about six feet wide, putting everything, including weeds, within easy reach from one side or the other. No tramping through the middle of the garden.

is easier, too, since it's easy to access both sides of the border. I've also incorporated plenty of small shrubs, grasses, sedges and perennials with evergreen foliage. All of these show the flowering plants off to full advantage without requiring constant upkeep.

USING HARDSCAPE ELEMENTS

Our house renovation created several little courtyards tucked around the back yard. We decided to use one for a simple contemplation area constructed of pea gravel, old bricks and a millstone fountain. We've kept the greenery and furnishings spare: a teak bench, table and chairs and four boxwood in planters tucked into the corners.

Until I used the space, I probably wouldn't have thought of it as a "garden." But it's a sheltered spot where we can enjoy the sunshine in the winter and listen to the birds in the spring. To my great surprise, the grandkids absolutely love it (nothing like transferring gravel from one container to another to keep a two-year-old happy!). If this were my only gardening space, I

think I could just add some more containers with flowering plants and be content.

WORKING WITH NATURE, NOT AGAINST IT

I've joked for years that my gardening style is "managed chaos"—a very relaxed approach borne out of wanting lots of gardens without having time to manicure them. It turns out that this "light touch" approach is good not only for my back but also for the other living creatures with whom I share the great outdoors.

As I've aged, I've noticed that how I spend time in the garden has shifted. I now spend more time matching plants to existing site conditions, adding more layers of plants to existing beds, lightly editing the garden throughout the growing season, and enjoying the birds, the bees and the butterflies. I spend much less time fertilizing, watering, weeding, pruning, applying pesticides, digging and mulching. I'm not ignoring these traditional



This gravel and brick courtyard with its millstone fountain has become an integral part of our garden enjoyed by all ages— even though the "green" elements are very spare.

Photos courtesy of Sandy Wilson

activities. I've just come to realize that the garden rarely needs them—and is sometimes better off without them.

I'm happy for the garden to look a little shaggy since it's brimming with life. Letting go of the concept of garden perfection has been liberating, to say the least. It's an approach that's earth-friendly—and will serve me well as the years march on. ■

Challenges to the Unison Community

By Tara Connell

A lot is happening in Loudoun County that impacts people who live in and around Unison. Just look at this list:

- Zoning changes in the current ordinance overhaul that can affect Unison and ...
- ...could also encourage additional development in Western Loudoun;
- Board of Supervisor (BOS) indifference, even hostility, to rural village preservation;
- Loss of representation from two supervisors to one through redistricting;
- Rapid ownership turnover in the Village of Unison;
- Unresolved water and sewer issues.

These are some of the most immediate challenges to Unison and its environs that 29 members of the greater Unison community identified when they met March 12 during a freak spring snow storm and retreat of the Unison Preservation Society (UPS) at the Unison Store. One of the goals of the retreat: to build consensus within the community and UPS on what the organization can and should to do about these challenges.

All 29 attendees were concerned neighbors and present, former and future mem-

bers of the Board of Directors of UPS, which owns the store and uses it as a base for community activities. The purpose of the non-profit UPS is to benefit the public by "preserving, promoting and fostering the natural character and the historic, architectural and cultural qualities of the area in and around Unison."

Because of the retreat and the challenges list, UPS put several items on its To-Do list. They include:

1) Engage the community in the effort to have Unison named a Rural Historic Village under the latest County Plan and Zoning Code, and also possibly an Historic District for several homes within larger Village area. The Historic Village designation will give Unison certain protections under the County Plan—such as the right be consulted about certain changes and to create our own, unique Small Area Plan under the rewritten zoning law. The Historic District protects those architecturally historic homes.

2) Improve its outreach to the community—particularly new residents—and be more inclusive. First step: Improve our contact lists and continue the improve-

ments to our Web site (unisonva.org) and social media: We are on Instagram and Facebook. Give us your email address to help in that effort: Write to us at unisonnewsletter22@gmail.com.

3) Continue to protect and improve the store while sharing it more broadly with the community. Success with a water and sewer effort, or an alternative, is required here. See item #6.

4) Assist the community in finding information about the Zoning Ordinance Rewrite and encourage people to comment. Here goes: The Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition (loudouncoalition.org) is an excellent place to start. Its zoning section has huge amounts of information about the effort. Loudouncounty.gov/zoningordinancere-write is the mother ship and takes you to where you can comment. The 90-day public review period is underway now (it began in April). The Department of Planning and Zoning is expected to give public guidance on how to provide input.

5) Redistricting. On May 11, the Board of Supervisors will hold a public hearing on



Unison Preservation Society Newsletter

Published by

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How to Support the Unison Preservation Society (UPS):

UPS depends upon contributions from people living in our community who want to preserve our historic village and the countryside surrounding it. Since the UPS is a not-for-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation registered in Virginia, all contributions are tax deductible. Contributions should be made to the Unison Preservation Society and sent to the post office box listed above.

Ideas for Newsletter Articles:

We are particularly interested in gathering material about Unison for future UPS newsletters.

If you have ideas for newsletter stories, please e-mail us at

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the new map of election districts for the county. At their March 15 meeting, they made a number of changes—including moving the district that includes Unison into a new so-far unnamed district that also includes more of suburban Brambleton. The upshot is that Unison may lose a representative from the West and instead have one that lives in Brambleton. The loss of a supervisor knowledgeable in rural issues will force new strategies in maintaining low development densities in the West and a higher level of activism by UPS and the community.

6) UPS is part of the team working with the county as it is examining ways to improve water and sewer in Unison. The latest step was a survey of homes in the Water/Sewer mapped area. Next up is a village-wide informational session. Likely outcomes will be that residents will be given several options of communal water and sewer systems to select from.

7) Continued pressure by residents to maintain the open nature of the West is facing an increasingly unsympathetic Board of Supervisors, most of whom represent the eastern part of the county where the demand for thousands of new homes is growing. These views were evident in the debate over redistricting. Comments basically ran to: If you want low density, you don't deserve two representatives. UPS continues its alliance with the Loudoun Coalition and the Loudoun Historic Village Alliance as they work to win support for the open spaces of the West by stressing its low maintenance cost, profitability and historic value. ■

Waiting for Go Dog

Caroline and Jack Helmly set up a bench along their property on Unison Road for bikers and walkers. Some neighborhood dogs apparently didn't get the memo and decided the bench must be for them. Incidentally, when the dogs aren't using it, Caroline and Jack see lots of bikers and walkers using it for a rest stop as well as families stopping for a picnic.



Unison's Field of Dreams



Aubrey Hall checks out the field on Bloomfield Road that used to be where the Unison baseball team played. Even today, you can still see where home plate was.

The 29 people that gathered March 12 to discuss challenges facing Unison burst into applause just once. Was it for a brilliant idea? No. A grand strategy realized. Nuh uh.

It was for Aubrey Hall, who had just admitted he played for the last Unison baseball team back in 1956. Yes, Aubrey. The newest Unison resident in the room.

Aubrey was raised in Purcellville, a member of the family that owns the Hall Funeral Home. He played for a number of teams in the Loudoun County Baseball League during his youth, mostly for Round Hill. He played for Unison just one year "because they needed a player." He was 17.

He went on to become a doctor and practice in Clifton Forge, VA until his retirement a couple of years ago when he thought about coming home. Low and behold, a house opened up for sale across the street from the old Unison baseball diamond. And next to it was a house for his daughter and son-in-law. Now, as you can see in the picture, he is still outstanding in his field.

