



Unison Preservation Society
NEWSLETTER

Working to Protect and Preserve our Historic Countryside

*Winter at Oak Spring Garden.
Courtesy of OSG.*

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• WINTER •

UNISON, VIRGINIA

Oak Spring Garden: Way More than a Beautiful Estate

By Howard Lewis

Most people living in the Unison area likely associate the Oak Spring Garden (OSG) with the beautiful walled garden and landscape of ancient trees and open fields surrounding the Mellon's former estate on Rokeby Road (*see photo below*). But Oak Spring actually is much more than this. Over the past half dozen years, it has become an important horticultural and botanical institution supporting a broad range of scientific and artistic work

covering everything from research on carbon sequestration in leaves to fabulous drawings of the bobolinks nesting in the fields around the former estate.

To get a better idea of the work going on there, I recently sat down with Peter Crane in the Sunday Kitchen at the Mellon's former home to learn more about the OSG Library, its Fellowship and Residency programs as well as the recently established Biocultural Conservation Farm. Peter



Guest cottage in Oak Spring Garden. Courtesy of OSG.

took over as President of the Oak Spring Garden Foundation (OSGF) in 2016 after serving as Dean of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies from 2009 to 2016. Besides teaching early in his career, as well as serving as Director of the Field Museum in Chicago, Peter also was Director of the world famous Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew from 1999-2006. He was knighted in the UK in 2004 for his work in horticulture and conservation.

LIBRARY

Surprisingly, preservation of the gardens and house actually were not Mrs. Mellon's primary concern. Her library of rare botanical books and objects was her top priority. "Yes, she felt the most important thing," Peter explained, "was the library because of the totally unique collection of books and objects she had built up over a long time." The main purpose of the OSGF, established in 1993, was to preserve the library in its present location on the grounds of OSG. "If at all possible, Mrs. Mellon wanted the library to stay here in the building she created, but after her death in 2014, it was not clear if that



Photo by Howard Lewis.



The library at Oak Spring Garden. Photo by Roger Foley

would be possible. The good news is that eventually it did stay here.”

The library contains 19,000 rare books, manuscripts and works of art related to botany, horticulture, landscape and garden design. In-person access to these rare works is limited to scholars and participants in OSG’s Fellowship and Residency programs, but the general public can access much of the library’s collection through occasional library programs and the OSG website. It is impossible here to even come close to describing everything in the library’s astonishing collection that ranges from rare manuscripts, one of which dates to the 14th Century, on medicinal herbs, to Jacques Boyceau’s 1638 volume *Traité du Jardinage*, which Mrs. Mellon regularly consulted in her own garden design work. It even has a collection of Chinese porcelain that was buried for over 200 years under the ocean until it was recovered in 1986.

The botanical artwork found in the OSG library’s books on medicinal herbs, for example, is exquisite, and for that reason alone make these books worth preserving, but how relevant are old books on medicinal herbs in today’s GMO world? “Not only do these books illuminate the long, constantly changing, human relationship with the natural world, but they often contain forgotten knowledge about plants and their uses. In our enthusiasm for modern technology it is import to keep our hubris in check” said Peter.

Since county regulations constrain public access to OSG, the team is exploring other ways to reach out to people. A good example of this is an exhibit this year on the work of the famous landscape

architect, Fredrick Law Olmsted, celebrating the bicentennial of his birth. Olmsted had a definite influence on Mrs. Mellon’s garden and landscape designs.² Among other things, the Olmsted firm designed the garden in the home where she grew up in Princeton, New Jersey. The exhibit, which can be found on the OSG website³, pulls together material from very diverse sources. It has been downloaded by hundreds of organizations all over the country.

FELLOWSHIP AND RESIDENCIES PROGRAMS

A different example of OSGF’s outreach is its Fellowship program that offers emerging leaders in their respective fields of expertise financial support as well as access to OSG resources as they pursue their studies and research work. The Fellowships are offered in four different areas: nature related art in the broad sense, bibliographic study, plant science and conservation biology. Last year, OSGF received 700 applications for its 2022 Fellowships and also its program of residencies.



“Impossible Garden” wallpaper designed by OSG Fellow, Emma Steinkraus. Courtesy of Emma Steinkraus

Here are two examples of recent work done under the OSG Fellowships:

- **Emma Steinkraus** used her 2021 Fellowship for Artistic Excellence to further her studies on the contribution of women to art in botanical science before 1900.⁴ Initially, she thought there would only be a few such women; instead, she discovered more than 130. In the OSG Library, she was able to see the actual work of these women that stretch over a 400-year period. She then came up with the very original idea of piecing together all the different botanical art she had found into wallpaper—“a sort of impossible garden” as Ms. Steinkraus says. It is hard to believe that Mrs. Mellon wouldn’t have found a way to use this unique wallpaper someplace in Oak Spring.

- **Aleca Borsuk**, a PH.D. candidate in Plant Ecophysiology at Yale University, was the first Plant Science Research Fellow at OSG. She is studying the internal anatomy of leaves in order to figure out how they help plants assimilate carbon, which she hopes will improve carbon assimilation models.⁵ Her research is part material science, part engineering and part plant biology. Much of this research, of course, takes place in labs, but Ms. Borsuk found the time she spent at OSG interacting with other fellows and residents allowed her “to step back from my work and think about how I can communicate my science to other scholars and folks with no background in it.”

The OSG Residency Program, started in 2021, is a more limited version of the Fellowship program. OSG plans to award about 32 interdisciplinary Residencies each year to artists, conservation specialists, scholars, scientists or writers. “For



Aleca Borsuk is the first Plant Science Research Fellow at Oak Spring Garden. Courtesy of OSG

two weeks, the residents live on the OSG grounds,” Peter explains, “with the goal of providing individuals with the time and space to pursue their own work alongside other residents who may be examining the natural world from different perspectives.” As Ms. Borsuk noted above about her time at OSG, getting out of your lane helps put your own work into perspective.

BIOCULTURAL CONSERVATION FARM

In 2017, OSGF purchased the 400-acre Rokeby Farm across the road from Oak Spring that is now the home of its Biocultural Conservation Farm (BCCF), which has been set up to produce food for the residents and fellows while also conserving and cultivating heirloom vegetables and fruits. The BCCF includes a 3/4-acre walled garden, a 1-acre fenced production area, numerous cold frames and several restored greenhouses that will use passive heating and cooling systems for year-round food production.

While part of the farm’s production will go to a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, which is now open for registration, at least half of its produce will be given away to food banks in the area. And the money generated by the CSA will

be used to support the farm’s educational mission and well as conserving and sharing heirloom crops, especially those found in the Virginia piedmont and Appalachian region.

“Take tomatoes,” Peter explains. “Many of the older varieties are actually more flavorful than what you find in the supermarket but they can be more difficult to grow and store. We want to save the seeds of these heirloom tomatoes as well as produce them. An Upperville resident recently provided us with seeds for tomatoes that her family has been growing here for 200 years.”

With an estimated loss of roughly 90% of global crop diversity, conserving seeds of heirloom and heritage crops is critical to a diverse food supply. Since the Appalachian region contains the highest diversity of food crops of almost any place in the world, the BCCF could hardly be located in a better place to carry out its mission. “Among other things, we’re hoping to connect with the residents in the communities around here,” Peter says, “who may have seeds that they or their families have been saving and growing for generations.”

For those Unison residents who aren’t scholars in medieval manuscripts or

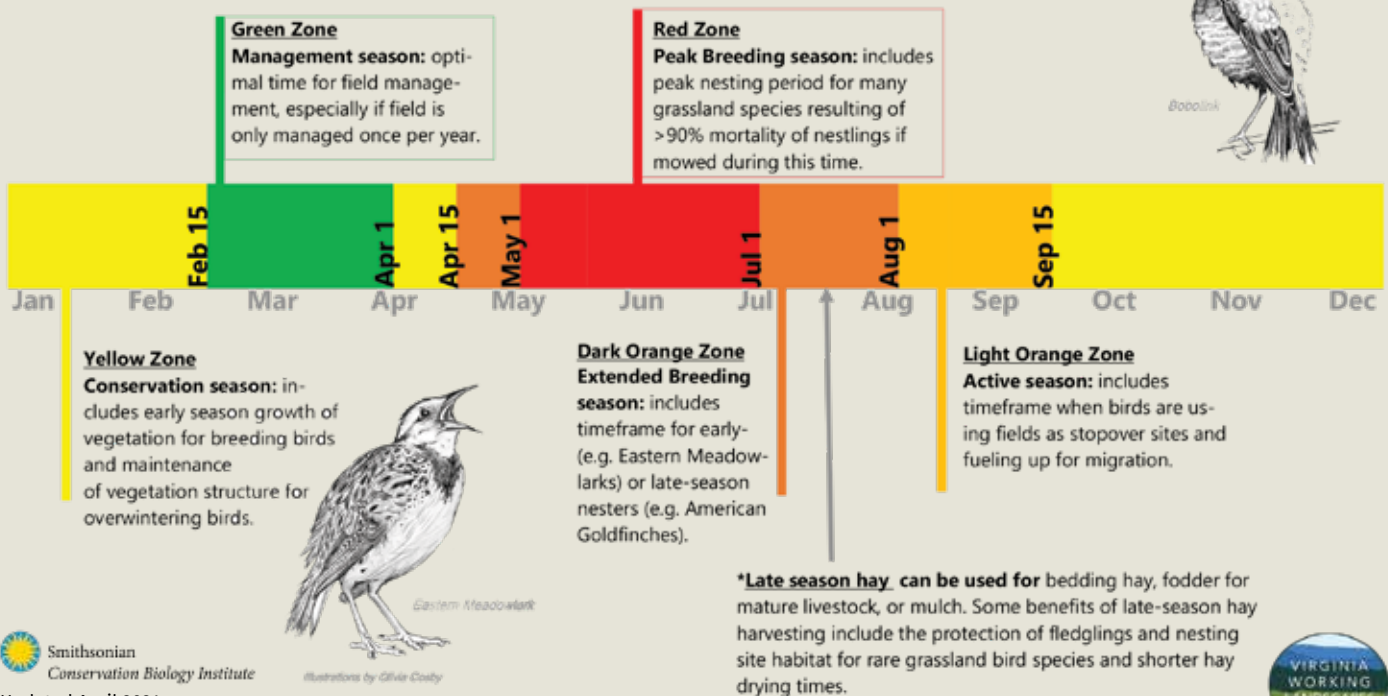
emerging leaders in the fields such as plant biology or botanical art, the BCCF is one place to consider if you are interested in getting more involved with the OSG. The farm is looking for volunteers (as well as heirloom seeds) from this area. “If we get more hands, we can do more,” Peter explains, “but there are also other things to do at OSG. Consider taking one of our Short Courses offered throughout the year. If spending a half day learning how to prune trees isn’t your thing, take a Short Course on how to make a backyard wildlife wreath or learn how to make paper. If nothing else, sign up for the OSG newsletter to find out about future events and learn more about what is in the library.” And, go see the garden Mrs. Mellon created at Oak Spring when it is open to the public on April 18-19.⁶ It is indeed beautiful.

Footnotes

- ¹ <https://www.osgf.org>
- ² <https://www.osgf.org/blog/2021/11/15/bunny-mellon-frederick-law-olmsted-and-olmsted-200>
- ³ <https://olmsted200exhibit.com>
- ⁴ <https://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn21/steinkraus-the-impossible-garden-interactive-feature>
- ⁵ osgf.org/blog/2021/11/30/meet-our-fellows-aleca-borsuk-and-the-world-within-a-leaf.
- ⁶ Tickets available here: www.eventbrite.com/o/oak-spring-garden-foundation-25540517839

Field Management Risk Calendar for Grassland Birds:

Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL), part of the Smithsonian Institute in Front Royal, recently came out with this risk calendar on managing fields for grassland birds. See reference below for complete VWL handout on this subject.



Updated April 2021

For references and citations, visit <https://www.vaworkinglandscapes.org/education/resources/field-management-guidelines-for-grassland-birds/>.





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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 unisonpreservsoc@unisonva.org.



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Keeping Unison Beautiful

By Howard Lewis

If it weren't for a number of our neighbors who regularly pick up trash along the roads around Unison, the place would look a whole lot worse.¹ Two of the leaders in this neighborhood effort are Lucy Bernstein and Flora Hillman. Each spring, Lucy, as part of the Keep Loudoun Beautiful program, e-mails many of us asking that we select a stretch of a nearby road, pick up the trash along it and put it in those orange bags. Then VDOT will come along and pick them up. After a winter of people throwing trash out of the windows of their cars, these spring cleanups are vital to cleaning up our neighborhood. She says to expect an e-mail in March for this year's clean up. As for Flora, anyone who regularly drives down Willisville, Airmont or Furr roads can't miss her dressed in a florescent pink vest, riding her e-bike with a trash hauler attached to the back. She does this all year round and covers somewhere between 15-20 miles on her trash collecting days. Because of that, the Land Trust of Virginia awarded her its 2021 Volunteer Hero.



Flora Hillman on trash patrol around Unison. Photo by Howard Lewis

Picking up trash is "an incredible uplifting experience," according to Flora. People wave as they go by, stop to thank her, and some have even adopted parts of "her roads". So, the next time you see someone dressed in a bright pink jacket on an e-bike picking up trash along the road, slow down and wave.

¹To learn more about how you can help keep Unison beautiful, contact UPS at unisonva@gmail.com.

Unison Updates

St. Louis Land Saved From Development

Forty-two acres in St. Louis bought by local philanthropist Chuck Kuhn will be placed in easement through Old Dominion Land Conservancy "to protect it from development and preserve the open space for future generations," a spokesman for Kuhn said. The land, the subject of years of protests by residents and preservations, was slated to be developed into 45 houses by Jack Andrews' company MOJAX. Kuhn said "Conserving the land also will help ensure that nearby and long-time residents of Saint Louis—many of whom are descendants of the first African-American settlers—will be able to afford to stay in their homes since this will prevent costly property tax increases in the area. In addition, the purchase will help preserve their family history."

VRBO for Unison

Capping the stunning sale of six homes in the central village area in less than a year was the

news that one of the homes was sold to a company that planned to use it mainly for short term rentals with the owner not on site. Sale of the "Weinberg" house at 21035 Unison Road on Jan. 14 to such an owner was confirmed by the seller. The sale comes as Loudoun is grappling with a fast-growing industry of "Commercial Short Term" rentals, most of which are unregistered. Also, their legal status under county zoning rules is still being worked out. As a result, the county is seeking input on these types of businesses as it rewrites its zoning laws. Unison Preservation Society is providing input and would like to hear from residents at unisonva@gmail.com.

Grants for well and septic repairs

Homeowners with incomes at or below the 200% federal poverty guidelines can get help fixing or replacing their well and/or septic systems with a new Septic and Well Assistance Program (SWAP) announced by Virginia Department of Health. Application and information on eligible projects can be found at www.vdh.virginia.gov/environmental-health/swap/.