

# The Lady as Landscape Gardener: Beatrix Farrand at the Arnold Arboretum, Part 2

Jane Brown

**"Your trust in my training is the greatest honor of my fifty years of active practice."**

—Beatrix Farrand to Dr. Paul C. Mangelsdorf, May 15, 1946, on her appointment as Consultant Landscape Gardener to the Arboretum

Having launched the young Beatrix Jones on her career in the late 1890s, Professor Charles Sprague Sargent, her "Chief" as she called him, was a continuing benefactor in her progress. Beatrix and her mother, Mary Cadwalader Jones, invariably visited Holm Lea for the rhododendron parties each June, on their annual northward migration from New York to summer in Bar Harbor. (Beatrix, in her turn, most frequently used the hybrids connected with her friends, Mrs. C. S. Sargent, Ignatius Sargent, and Louisa Hunnewell in plantings for her clients.) The Professor never failed, it seemed, to give her a discreet good recommendation where he could, and even gave her Christmas presents of significance; in 1911 it was Wilhelm Miller's *What England Can Teach Us About Gardening*, in which Holm Lea was much praised, and where Beatrix found the corroboration for many of her own opinions.<sup>1</sup> The Sargents, loving her, were doubtless overjoyed, as were her other friends, by her happy marriage to the historian Max Farrand in December 1913, and though the pattern of her life changed, she worked as hard as ever, and still paid frequent visits to the Arnold Arboretum, with her notebook, to refresh her knowledge of plants for a new commission or situation. The relationship between Beatrix and her Professor was aptly

illuminated by Mildred Bliss at the very start of the commission for Dumbarton Oaks: having put forward all her design ideas, Beatrix was keen to make a brave start and wrote to Mrs. Bliss, sending photographs of three cedars, which she could obtain from the Arboretum for \$300 each for digging and packing. Mrs. Bliss replied promptly in favor of the cedars, noting that if "Mr. Sargent loves you enough to part with them," then go ahead.<sup>2</sup>

When Charles Sargent died, aged eighty-five and still working, in March 1927, Beatrix was about to embark on a major diversion from her life's pattern because of Max Farrand's appointment as Director of the Henry E. Huntington Library at San Marino, California. From then on the Farrands' lives were divided basically into winters in California and summers at Bar Harbor, though much of Beatrix's time was taken in long train journeys to keep her scattered commissions in Chicago, Long Island, Washington, D. C., and at Yale in order. She had little time for her old haunts, except for a brief call on Alice Sargent at Holm Lea to design a new trellis for the house walls.

Connections with the Arboretum were maintained through Susan Delano McKelvey<sup>3</sup> and Chief Propagator William Henry Judd.<sup>4</sup> It was to these two people that she turned for help when she agreed to her longest-distance



commission of all, to work for Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst (the former Dorothy Whitney Straight) at Dartington Hall in Devon, England, in 1932. She needed to renew English contacts, so William Judd (who had been trained at Kew and was secretary to the Kew Gardeners of America) introduced her to Sir Arthur Hill, then Kew's director, and Mrs. McKelvey paved her way to the doyen of English plantsmen, W. J. Bean, who was working on the third and final volume of *Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles* (1933), following his retirement from the Royal Botanic Garden.

### Reef Point

The contacts worked well and Beatrix was grateful. Susan McKelvey became a frequent visitor to the Farrands' Bar Harbor home, Reef Point, and she rarely arrived empty-handed. Many varieties of clematis and lonicera went from the Arboretum to Reef Point, where their progress in that northerly and sea-girt habitat was eagerly reported. William Judd went frequently to Reef Point, but just as often across the country to the Huntington gardens, where there were not only the exotic delights of the cactus garden, but also other visiting experts for entertainment. Beatrix greatly enjoyed putting her plant-expert friends together, introducing one to another, and leaving them to enjoy their private worlds: during the thirties Judd helped her to educate and entertain two head gardeners from Dartington Hall for whom she arranged grand tours, as well as John Murray from Yale Botanical Garden and various park superintendents from New Haven. The latter she felt were "much in need" of Judd's skill and help, and in general it seems clear that if she could have dispatched every head gardener and grounds superintendent (let alone a few of the architects!) that she encountered to the Arboretum for enlightenment and inspiration, her working life would have been a much smoother path.

By the end of the 1930s (Beatrix was sixty-five in 1937), the Farrands' lives became more



*Beatrix Farrand in her late sixties, c. 1937. Reprinted with permission from the Princeton University Library.*

and more devoted to where they felt really at home, at Reef Point. They set up the Reef Point Gardens Corporation in 1939, with Mrs. McKelvey as a member, to carry forward their plans to turn their home and garden into an educational center for people interested in every kind of gardening. The prime objects were to demonstrate "what outdoor beauty can contribute to those who have the interest and perception that can be influenced by trees and flowers and open air composition."<sup>5</sup> To these ends they set about the reorganization of the garden and, most importantly, the naming and recording of the plants. It was soon revealed that, in several aspects of the garden, the educated but mainly instinctive acquisitions of the years had grown into interesting collections, especially for a garden in eastern Maine, of rhododendrons and azaleas, climb-



ing plants on the house, and single-flowered hybrid tea roses. Thrown back into the puzzles of identification and nomenclature, Beatrix naturally returned to the sure ground of her associations with the Arnold. Perhaps to smooth her path, she wrote to Dr. Alfred Rehder on 25 June 1940 in her characteristically modest vein: "You have doubtless forgotten an old acquaintance who used to see you when she was occasionally at the Arboretum with her " 'chief' Professor Sargent," but she wanted to thank him for his *Manual of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs*, which had given "so much aid to a working landscape gardener" over the years. The occasion was her receipt of a revised edition.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Rehder, of course, had not forgotten her but chided, "when Professor Sargent was still with us, you used to come much more frequently" and hoped she would return to the Arboretum soon.<sup>7</sup>

Beatrix took the opportunity, at least by letter, and tackled Chief Propagator Judd on the identification of her *Loniceras*, which he did; they were both pleased with her *Lonicera tragophylla*, the Wilson introduction, with large butter-yellow heads of flowers, which had thrived since coming from the Arboretum. The naming process went on through Reef Point's clematis, some pears, apples, barberries and hemlocks, sempervivums and alpine. Soon a formal arrangement to pay Judd's expenses was made, and the Arboretum was also offered, in return, any cuttings that might be wanted, as long as specific instructions were sent as to how to take them and how to pack them. The rare *Decaisnea fargesii*, with remarkable metallic blue pods was offered, and a couple of little *Clematis tanгутica obtusiuscula* were accepted.

### The Arnold Connection

The record of plants sent from the Arnold to Reef Point is by no means complete, but there seemed to be two particularly successful Arnold "children." A docket dated May 12, 1924, lists the *Tripterygium regelii*, which Professor Sargent sent, telling Beatrix that Reef Point was most welcome to it as it was

a "dud" plant. In "Climbing Plants in Eastern Maine"<sup>8</sup> she writes: "This species of the *Celastrus* family was planted on the southeast corner of the house, and started to grow with rampant cheerfulness. Its sweetly scented trusses of tiny flowers are often nearly three feet long, and in July the whole side of the house where it grows is as murmurous with bees as any English lime-tree walk." The other success story was the Japanese hydrangea-vine, *Schizophragma hydrangeoides*, sent from the Arnold on October 9, 1931: this grew marvelously up to the second-floor windows on the north corner of the garden house, only outdone in magnificence by two big *Hydrangea petiolaris*, which clambered to more than thirty feet.

In the early 1940s, Reef Point's garden flowered as its makers intended; both Farrands worked very hard for their project, our "little horticultural foundation," as Beatrix described it to William Judd in July 1942. "You may like to know," she continued, "that already at this early season we are sure that more than 300 people have visited the garden" and as she dictated the letter she could see more people wandering around.<sup>9</sup> Both Farrands were now entirely devoted to this dream project, but within a very short time Max Farrand's poor health marred their happiness. For his last year Beatrix worked doubly hard to achieve their plans for the education center and the library, and yet to keep the seriousness of his illness from him. When he died, in June 1945, just two days before her seventy-third birthday, she was both exhausted and stunned. The only thing she could do was to carry on, with now a kind of obsessive energy devoted to fulfilling Max's hopes and plans.

William Judd must have been a little perturbed to find a letter from her so soon, dictated the day after Max's death, at the moment the announcement appeared in the *Boston Herald*, asking him to identify her rhododendrons. Furthermore, she had already organized the cutting and packing of over sixty flower heads, and almost immediately these were tumbling out onto the laboratory





*Torch azaleas (Rhododendron obtusum var. kaempferi) growing on Bussey Hill in 1928. This picture accompanied Beatrix Farrand's article on the Arboretum that appeared in Arnoldia in 1946. Photo by J. Horace McFarland Co. From the Arnold Arboretum Archives.*

table. Judd, Dr. Rehder, and Donald Wyman dropped all they were doing, and prepared a list of names that was sent to her by return mail. She was not very satisfied; she queried many of their attributions, and sent another twenty-five blooms. In all they identified more than eighty specimens, mostly the species *calendulaceum*, *japonicum*, *myrtifolium*, and *arborescens*, with some Ghent and Fortunei hybrids, plus the cultivars 'Boule de Neige,' 'Bijou des Amateurs,' 'Louisa Hunnewell,' and 'Lady Armstrong.' Even so, she was forced to admit that Reef Point might need a real rhododendron expert, "so-called."

She knew that she was being ungracious, and "a nuisance to my friends" but it was her grief and desperation that made her so; fortunately, within a month she had resumed her appreciation of the "kind and helpful" William Judd and was hoping he would be her welcome guest later in the summer.

### **A Major Appointment**

The following spring she was both surprised and delighted to be appointed as Consultant Landscape Gardener to the Arboretum. "Your trust in my training is the greatest honor of my fifty years of active practice," she wrote to



Dr. Paul C. Mangelsdorf.<sup>10</sup> She accepted "in great humility of spirit" and with the "hope" that her colleagues would not be disappointed; she looked forward to working with Judd and Dr. Wyman. However, it was not to be, for a few days later William Judd died of a heart attack. The *Arnoldia* of June 7, 1946, paid tribute to him, and in the same issue, Beatrix's appointment was announced.

There was a justice in that her last important commission was at the place where she had started her career, but it was perhaps surprising that an almost seventy-five-year-old lady should start striding around the Arboretum, measuring, taking notes, and asking pertinent questions. She brought in an assistant, Robert W. Patterson, an architect and landscape architect from Bar Harbor,<sup>11</sup> to do the strenuous work, but she also warned Dr. Mangelsdorf, "You will need patience and understanding of physical limitations of age which are most irksome to me, but which must be recognized."<sup>12</sup>

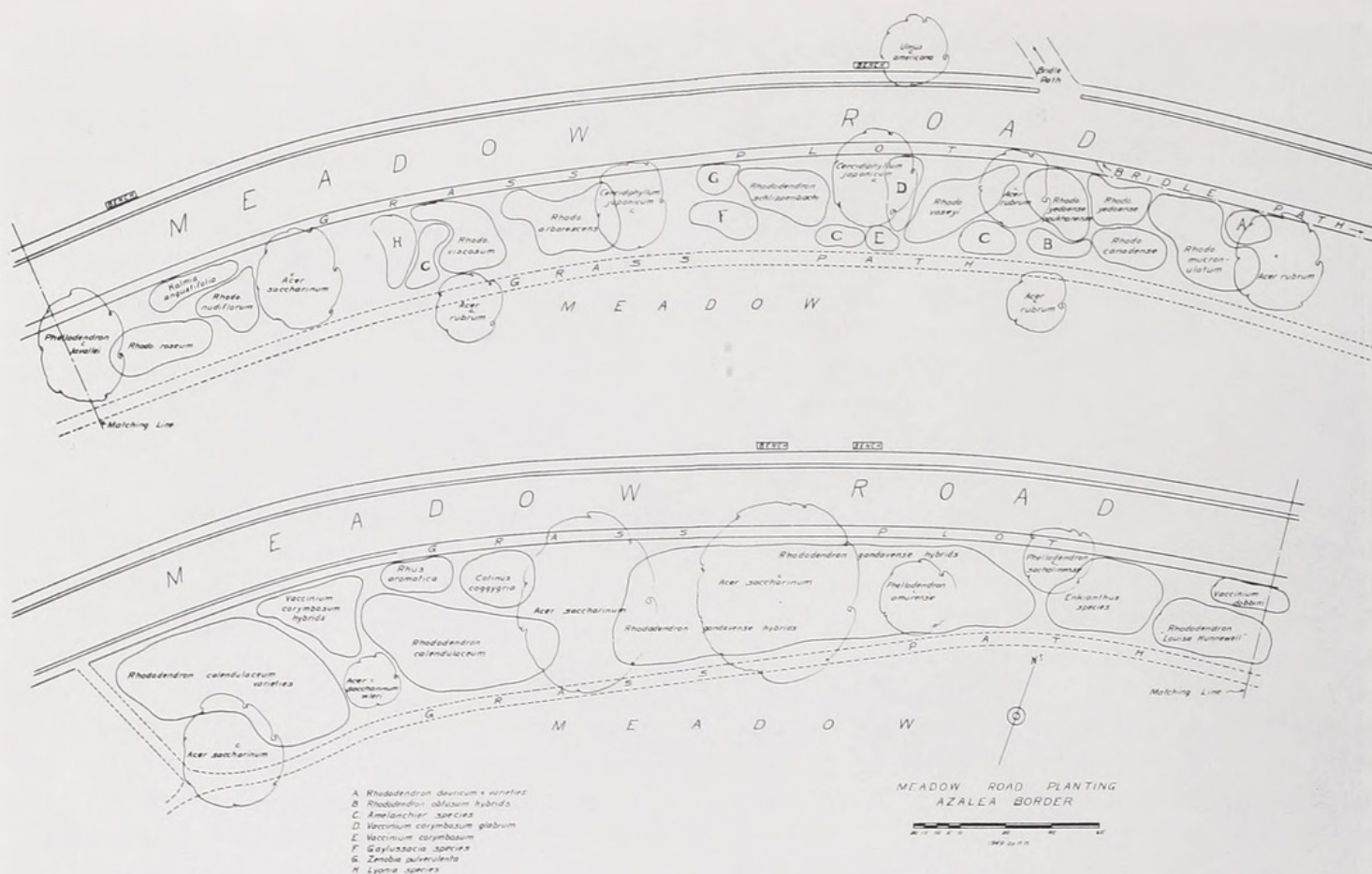
No such limitations seemed evident, for within two months of her appointment, that is, on 12 July 1946, she was writing to Dr. Mangelsdorf that Dr. Wyman, Patterson, and herself were in "hearty agreement on the main points." These points were no timid tinkering, but recommendations for major revisions to the appearance of the Arboretum. "Project One" advocated a remodeling of the planting at the main entrance, around the Hunnewell building, and at the Forest Hills entrance; a long-term plan for Hemlock Hill; and a revision of the planting on Bussey Hill. "Project Two" envisaged the removal of duplicates, and aged and outworn plants throughout the collections, and "Project Three" was for the establishment of a 25- to 40-acre nursery outside the Arboretum.<sup>13</sup> Immediate approval was sought for these recommendations, but Peter's Hill, the marsh at the main entrance, and a planned watering system for the whole Arboretum also required urgent consideration. She felt in a certain "psychological fog" as to how to obtain decisions or actions, and hoped her report was not too

much of a "tidal wave." Within a week Mangelsdorf had replied that Donald Wyman, who was Curator of the Living Collections, had all the authority required to make decisions about moving plants as necessary, which appeared a *carte blanche* to proceed. Donald Wyman, whom Beatrix had found "frosty" at first, had "thawed" considerably towards her, and they were getting on well, particularly when he visited her at Reef Point for discussions. The result was their list of twenty-three landscape problems needing immediate attention.

Surveys, plans, and discussions had taken half of her first year as consultant. *Arnoldia* of November 1, 1946, printed her draft paper on her approach to the design problems, which was a classic summation of landscape variabilities: time, soil depletion, a deterioration of soil quality in some places, new plant introductions, visitor problems, changes in taste, and particularly the devastating hurricane of September 21, 1938, had all taken their toll on Olmsted's original design for Sargent's conception. It seemed clear that one of the reasons for Beatrix Farrand's appointment as consultant was just that she was one of the few people around who could actually remember what Sargent said he was trying to do, and certainly her loyalty to the Professor was unshakable. She concluded, "Old friends of the Arboretum may feel aggrieved in seeing some of the plantations altered, but they will be less distressed when they realize that these very alterations are in the truest sense of the word restorations, as they are intended to restore the design to the original conception of the great botanist and artist who was its first director."<sup>14</sup>

She must have been busy with frequent visits to the Arnold for two and a half years, though no drawings or correspondence of work in progress appears to have survived. Her first descriptive report of the work she had supervised appeared in *Arnoldia* of April 15, 1949.<sup>15</sup> This elegant piece, "The Azalea Border," is a gem of landscape writing, beautifully balanced in its treatment of the botan-





Beatrix Farrand's plan for the azalea border along Meadow Road. From the Arnold Arboretum Archives.

ical and visual aspects of planting design. The accompanying plan was deceptively simple, for she and her colleagues at the Arboretum had achieved far more than just a "border." The land opposite the Hunnewell building, between Meadow Road and the marsh, had been cleared as a home for the family Ericaceae, a family of "distinction and elegance . . . from the flat and fragrant mats of mayflower to the tall rhododendrons and sourwoods."<sup>16</sup> Loads of peat had been imported and great care taken to place lovers of the damp places just where they could keep wet feet, but the design priorities had also been carefully interwoven with the planting: "Immediately inside the entrance the quiet open view over the marsh is maintained by low ground-hugging shrubs like bearberry, low blueberry and pachistima, ending in a higher mass after the first vista has been enjoyed."<sup>17</sup>

Then came the early-flowering deciduous rhododendrons ("the crinkled petals of *mucronulatum*, when they first appear, look as though they had been ill packed during the winter in a small valise"), keeping the lavender and purple shades separated from the pinks by "islands and tufts of shadbush, Labrador tea and leatherleaf with huckleberries and tall blueberries. The rhododendrons progressed through American natives and Chinese *schlippenbachii*s with *Enkianthus* and "good *Phellodendrons*" as well as old sumacs, to separate species from hybrids and pinks from oranges and scarlets. Once these had all settled, "further little tufts and wisps of the smaller Ericaceae will be tucked into the bays and hollows" and the grass path on the marsh side would be made.<sup>18</sup>

In the autumn of 1949,<sup>19</sup> Beatrix explained her designs for Peter's Hill, where Professor





A view of Meadow Road on 27 May 1950, with pinkshell azaleas and a flowering dogwood in bloom. From the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

Sargent's thorns had become a thicket and a fire hazard. Her plan showed how beautifully the plantations of *Crataegus* and *Malus*, the walks, and open glades would flow with the grain of the hill form, while the grove of native oaks and some old conifers on the west slopes were carefully saved. The very top of the hill, a typical New England knoll, was to be kept open for its view of Boston "with radiating vistas."

### The Final Years

By the time her piece on Peter's Hill appeared, Beatrix was well into her fourth year as the Arboretum's consultant (at a maximum of \$2,000 a year, though what she actually charged is not known). She had given of her

best and very considerable skills, but she was still keen to do more: "It looks as though our next big job were the rearrangement of the shrubs in the present shrub collecting area," she wrote to Dr. Karl Sax, the new Director, on November 9, 1949.<sup>20</sup> She was full of plans for herself and Donald Wyman to work on this area through the winter, and she was to come at the end of the month and discuss it all with them. Her plan was prepared but never carried out, and her correspondence ceases. What happened is not entirely clear: perhaps Donald Wyman, boosted by the publication of *Shrubs and Vines for American Gardens* in 1949 and *Trees for American Gardens* in 1951, felt he should be able to arrange his own collections, or perhaps Dr. Sax was over-



whelmed by the mounting controversy over moving the library, herbarium, and some of the Arboretum's staff to the new building in Cambridge. Another clue might lie in the constant reassurances and provisos with which she had had to package every move so far, in deference to the "old friends" of the Arnold who wanted nothing changed.<sup>21</sup> Troubled times were ahead for the Arboretum, but it seems sad that its distinguished landscape consultant was the first casualty.

And after all, Beatrix Farrand was eighty in 1952. She had to face the bitter truth that her beloved Reef Point Gardens, the "little horticultural institution" she had set up with her husband, could not be maintained. In 1955 she took steps to dismantle everything they had created, even the home which she had known since she was ten years old. That element of desperation, so evident in her actions immediately after Max Farrand's death, reasserted itself in her final acts. She disposed of her plants, destroyed her house and garden, and gave her life's working drawings (together with those of Gertrude Jekyll), her collection of prints and library of 2,700 books (including many rare herbals, floras, and gardening books) to the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of California's Berkeley campus. There are rational reasons for this course of events, but questions persist: if Beatrix Farrand's appointment as the Arnold's landscape consultant had not ended so ignominiously, would it not have been perfectly natural for the Arnold to have had her collections? And if the Arnold and Harvard had not been so embroiled in the controversy over the Jamaica Plain library and herbarium, should they not have been duty bound to conserve her legacy in its natural habitat? For the saddest thing was that in sending her legacy to California she had to flout the abiding rule of her landscape life—that of the fitness of any work for its setting. It was the rule that Charles Sprague Sargent had taught her.

Now, on the 120th anniversary of her birth, Beatrix Farrand's name is perpetuated at the

Arnold Arboretum by some splendid specimens of "her" *Forsythia*,<sup>22</sup> a tetraploid hybrid from 'Arnold Giant' raised in 1944, with magnificently rich, deep-yellow flowers, and—perhaps "an upright and vigorous" growth habit.

#### Acknowledgments

I am particularly grateful to Sheila Connor, Librarian of the Arnold Arboretum, for help with this part of my research on Beatrix Farrand.

- <sup>1</sup> Miller, W. 1911. *What England Can Teach Us About Gardening*. New York: Doubleday.
- <sup>2</sup> Letter from Mildred Bliss to Beatrix Farrand, 14 April 1924, Dumbarton Oaks Garden Library.
- <sup>3</sup> Schofield, E. A. 1987. A life redeemed: Susan Delano McKelvey and the Arnold Arboretum. *Arnoldia* 47 (4): 9-23.
- <sup>4</sup> William Henry Judd, 1888-1946; see *Arnoldia* 6(6): 25-28.
- <sup>5</sup> *Reef Point Gardens Bulletin* Vol. 1, No. 1, August 1946. Reef Point Gardens Collection, Documents Collection, College of Environmental Design, University of California, Berkeley.
- <sup>6</sup> Rehder, A. 1940. *Manual of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs Hardy in North America*, 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan.
- <sup>7</sup> Alfred Rehder to Beatrix Farrand, 27 June 1940, Arnold Arboretum Archives.
- <sup>8</sup> Farrand, B. 1954. Climbing plants in eastern Maine. *Plants and Gardens* 10(1): 40-44.
- <sup>9</sup> There were 2,000 visitors to Reef Point in the summer of 1945, and the total number after its closure in 1955 was many times that.
- <sup>10</sup> Beatrix Farrand to Paul C. Mangelsdorf at the Institute for Research in General Plant Morphology, Harvard University, 15 May 1946, Arnold Arboretum Archives.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert W. Patterson's fees were to be included in her own allowance of \$2,000 per year.
- <sup>12</sup> Farrand to Mangelsdorf, 15 May 1946, Arnold Arboretum Archives.
- <sup>13</sup> Farrand to Mangelsdorf, 12 July 1946, Arnold Arboretum Archives. The nursery was part of the use proposed for the Case Estates, which had been given to the Arboretum in 1942.
- <sup>14</sup> *Arnoldia* 6(10): 45-48, 1946.
- <sup>15</sup> *Arnoldia* 9(2): 6-7, 1949.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- <sup>19</sup> *Arnoldia* 9(9): 38-43, 1949.
- <sup>20</sup> Beatrix Farrand to Karl Sax, 9 November 1949, Arnold Arboretum Archives.



- <sup>21</sup> Beatrix had always conscientiously dealt with the "old friends" of the Arboretum who were shocked at her changes. In 1947, Dr. Sax asked her what she thought about the idea of forming a Friends' Association—she agreed and sent names of subscribers, adding, "What do you hope people will subscribe, \$10, \$100, or \$1,000 a year?" Farrand to Sax, 20 August 1947, Arnold Arboretum Archives.
- <sup>22</sup> The specimens of *Forsythia* 'Beatrix Farrand' were located and identified for me one fine afternoon in 1991 by Michael Dirr, author of *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants* (Champaign, Ill.: Stipes).

---

Jane Brown is a well-known writer on the history of landscape gardening. The information in this article is based on her forthcoming book on Beatrix Farrand's life and work, scheduled to be published by Viking in the spring of 1993.





Brown, Jane. 1992. "The Lady as Landscape Gardener: Beatrix Farrand at the Arnold Arboretum, Part 2." *Arnoldia* 52(1), 9–17.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/216909>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/251062>

**Holding Institution**

Harvard University Botany Libraries

**Sponsored by**

BHL-SIL-FEDLINK

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder.

Rights Holder: Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University

License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Rights: <https://biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.