

Creating A Harmonious Environment: An Art Collector's Garden

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The Challenges

Revitalizing Freer's garden is an exciting interdisciplinary project that requires the insights and skills of passionate academics, artists, craftsmen and supporters. The initial challenge was how to see past the extensive

changes made to the former garden site. Freer significantly modified the original garden of 1895 with a major addition to his home in 1906 (one part held Whistler's Peacock Room). After Freer's death in 1919 the entire garden was repurposed as an outdoor kindergarten area of the Merrill-Palmer School, then in midcentury the site was completely rebuilt as a geometric parterre. Since no planting plans have been found, a complex challenge has been finding and interpreting evidence from sources as archival documents, contemporary newspaper articles, period photographs, and correspondence from visitors. With effort, the tree and shrub lists have been determined from detailed invoices, newspaper reports and photographs. *Tree and shrub species in the revitalized garden are as specified in the original documentation, some cultivars are a close contemporary match.*



Freer House and Garden, 1904. Photograph by C.M. Hayes, University of Glasgow Special Collections

The Primacy of Textured Composition

A key insight is understanding that Freer's garden created a distinctive aesthetic space. Its tone was important for visitors as they passed through it from the ever-bustling world beyond Freer's art collection, as well as when viewed from the interior rooms, however fleeting or concentrated that framed moment may have been. How then are the plants to be arranged in the revitalized garden, given Freer had consulted both artist Thomas W. Dewing and architect Wilson Eyre, Jr, among others? The compiled plant list and careful inspection of enlarged period photographs show a distinctive blending of then-obscure Asian and Western plants were chosen for compositions rather than as an assembly of garden plants then in vogue. The plant palette is remarkably refined for any era: the shrubs and trees have mostly small to medium sized matte leaves, while the floral focus, other than the roses along the property boundary, is of small flowers, sometimes in trusses, primarily in whites and pinks. A select few bloom in dark colors that play with ever changing shadows. This palette provided Freer with a seasonal progression without a distracting floral extravaganza: the result was elegance and sophistication. Freer's interest in aesthetic "points of contact" between American and Asian art was subtly supported by the garden and its primacy of textured composition. An essential role of the garden was to offer visual repose: its colors and textures were in harmony with the original interior decorative paint surfaces (now buried or lost) and the extraordinary art that once hung on the walls within.

Revitalizing a Nuanced Aesthetic

Reaching within and beyond Japanese, Chinese and American design influences (the Moon Gate was removed for the 1906 addition), Freer created a sophisticated harmony - a nuanced aesthetic - unlike any other. Designing the revitalized garden has required balancing these traditions without prioritizing one. In addition, diverse University public-space criteria had to be addressed and contemporary realities would challenge Freer's use of lawn and gravel. The arcing walkway that guides one between the street and the carriage house echoes Freer's original carriage path. The missing original exterior porch railing leading to the former Peacock Room has been replicated, and new iron fencing with bluestone masonry columns has been installed to compliment and enclose the courtyard garden. A replica of the signature lantern currently outside the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, that was a 1905 Christmas gift from his friend and the respected international dealer in

Japanese art, Sadajirō Yamanaka, (1865-1936), has been commissioned.

The Freer House, Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University



Precise measurements for lantern replication by the Runciman team



Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919) made his fortune in railroad freight car manufacturing in Detroit. His remarkable shingle style residence on East Ferry Ave. was designed in 1892 by Wilson Eyre, Jr. Freer's home contained one of the world's greatest collections of Asian and American art, including works by Whistler and the Peacock Room. Freer bequeathed his collection to the Smithsonian where it is housed today at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.



The Freer House (1892) is ranked as one of the most important historic buildings in Michigan. Its fine architectural detail and rich cultural history are both locally and internationally significant. The Freer House is also recognized for its role in child and family development as the home of the renowned Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute since 1920.

The Freer House membership organization works to preserve this landmark through public events, tours and fundraising for restoration. Recent accomplishments include the reproduction of original paintings for the main hall and parlor and a new historically appropriate roof. Current goals include the courtyard garden and the Whistler Gallery restoration projects.

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The Freer House Garden Revitalization Committee

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Project Contractors and Consultants

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Installation: Tim McAlister, Project Manager, Tim Diaz, Project Foreman, W. H. Canon Landscape Company

Maintenance: Chad Poole, W. H. Canon Landscape Company

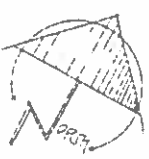
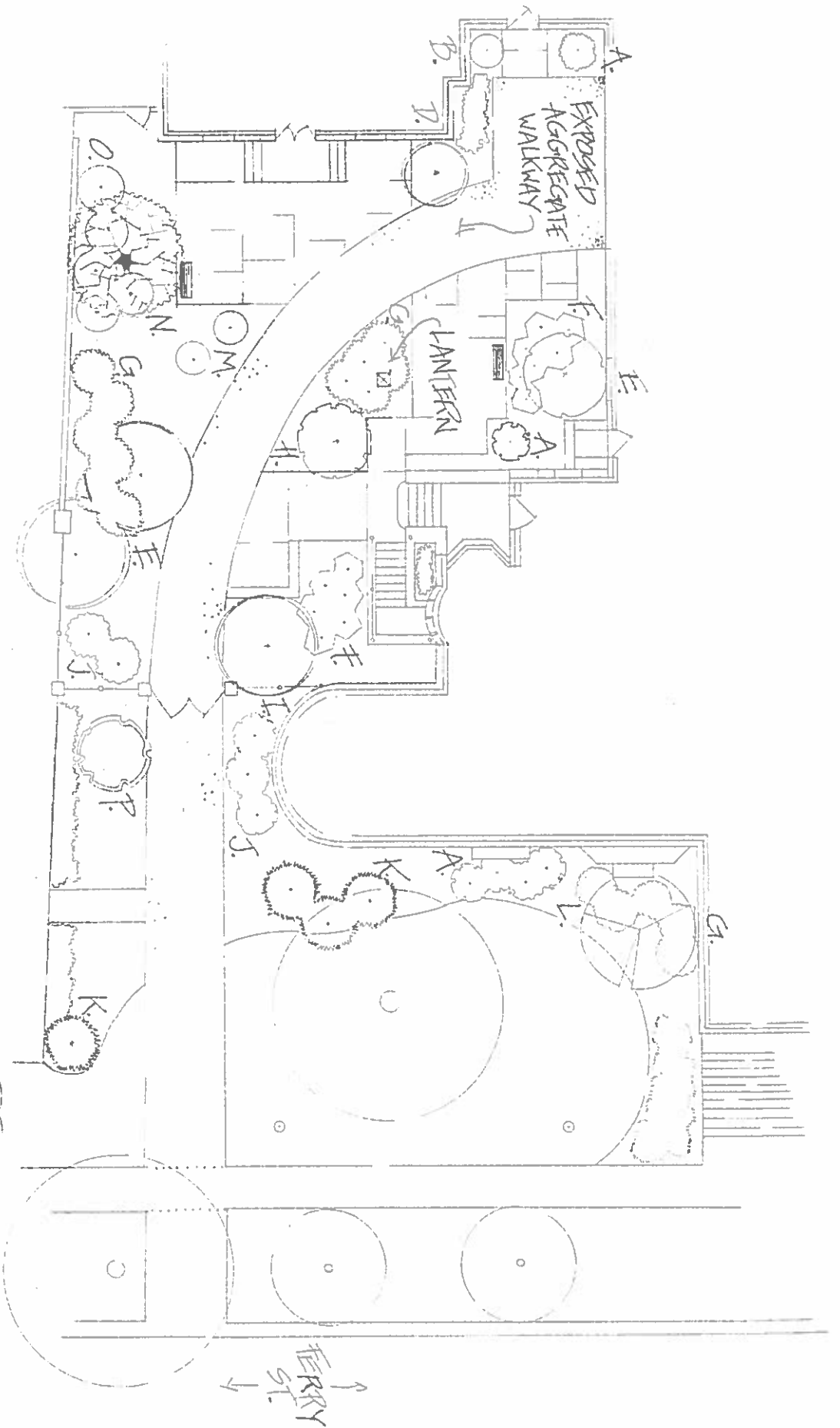
Special thanks to Charles Little, Past Chairman, and Liseann Gouin, President, of The Japan America Society of Michigan and Southwestern Ontario, for their outstanding leadership support of the Freer House Garden from conception to completion of this unique project.


Additional thanks to Fred Knight, K. C. Runciman Landscapes, David Michener, PhD, Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum, University of Michigan, and Andrea Canon, W. H. Canon Landscape Company, for their exceptional commitment to the creation, fruition and maintenance of the Freer House Garden.

Over 110 individuals, organizations, businesses, foundations and garden clubs have made the Freer House Garden Project possible through their generous support. We welcome your participation.

The Freer House Garden is dedicated in honor of Phebe Goldstein and in memory of Denise Little

THE CHARLES LANG FREER HOUSE
GARDEN & COURTYARD REVITALIZATION




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Charles Freer House Courtyard and Garden Revitalization Project

Plant key

- A. *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Grandiflora' - *Grandiflora hydrangea**
 - B. *Hibiscus syriacus* – rose of Sharon*
 - C. Weigela 'Dark Horse' – *Dark Horse weigela**
 - D. *Cercis canadensis* – red bud*
 - E. *Ginkgo biloba* 'Princeton Sentry' – *Princeton Sentry ginkgo*, male
 - F. *Duetzia gracilis* 'Nikko' – *Nikko slender duetzia**
 - G. *Kalmia latifolia* 'Sarah' – *Sarah mountain laurel**
 - H. *Acer palmatum* 'Emperor' - *Emperor Japanese maple**
 - I. *Chionathus virginicus* – white fringe tree*
 - J. *Viburnum plicatum* 'Newzan' – *Newzan Japanese snowball viburnum**
 - K. *Thuja orientalis* "Aurea Nana" – *Dward Golden arborvitae**
 - L. *Cornus florida* 'Rubra' – pink flowering dogwood
 - M. *Calycanthus florida* 'Rubra' – *Sweetshrub, Carolina allspice**
 - N. *Prunus serrulata* 'Sekiyama' – *Sekiyama flowering cherry*
 - O. *Chaenomeles speciosa* 'Jet Trail' – *Jet Trail flowering quince**
 - P. *Fagus sylvatica* 'Artopunicea' – *purple European beech**
- * Trees and shrubs chosen from original plant lists
- Perennials - *Wolly thyme*, *Hellebores* – *Lenten rose*, *Hakonechloa macra* – *Japanese forest grass*,
Pachysandra terminalis

Courtyard - constructed with reclaimed sandstone sidewalk from Toledo, Ohio

Carriage walkway - exposed aggregate concrete

Masonry columns and seat wall - constructed with bluestone to match house

Peacock Room porch rail - handcrafted by James Viste

Lantern – reproduction of original, carved by Stone Forest

Fence and gates – ornamental steel, not original to site, reflective of Peacock Room porch rail