

AN ART COLLECTOR'S GARDEN

An exhibit at the historic Charles Lang Freer House
Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University

"Mr. Freer's garden and grounds are those of a man who has traveled far and seen much."

Detroit Sunday News Tribune, September 5, 1897



Freer House, 1906. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



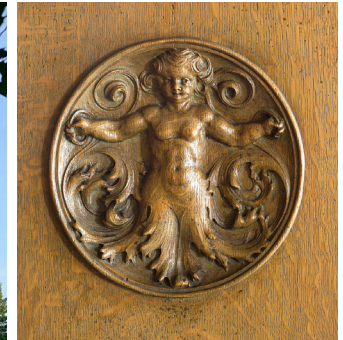
THE FREER HOUSE

71 E. Ferry Street, Detroit MI, 48202 | 313-664-2500 | www.mpsi.wayne.edu/freer/

THE FREER HOUSE

The Freer House is considered to be one of the most important historic buildings in Michigan with its outstanding architecture and history as “the original Freer Gallery of Art.” Today, parts of the building continue to serve as offices for child and family development faculty of the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute/WSU, while major sections of the house serve as space for visitors, meetings and events.

The Freer House features quarter-sawn oak paneling, built in cabinets and seating, and ornate decorative light fixtures and hardware. Reproductions of 11 paintings by the American artists, Dewing, Tryon and Thayer, have recently been installed in their original locations. Restoration goals include the revitalization of Freer’s historic courtyard gardens, restoration of the 1906 Whistler Gallery as an exhibition and meeting space, and creation of a public welcome and interpretative center for visitors in the former carriage house. To support restoration of The Freer House or join as a member, please call 313.664.2500 or contact: william.colburn@wayne.edu.



PHOTOS BY
ALEXANDER VERTIKOFF





THE FREER HOUSE

AN ART COLLECTOR'S GARDEN

This exhibit was created by

Catherine Blasio, Exhibit Designer / William S. Colburn, Editor / Meghan Urisko, Exhibit Coordinator
Freer House, Merrill-Palmer Skillman Institute

and

Michael D. Coleman, College for Creative Studies

Created in conjunction with the Freer House lecture:

*The Artist's Garden:
American Impressionism and the Garden Movement, 1887-1920*

by

Anna O. Marley, PhD

Curator of Historical American Art, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
presented at the Detroit Institute of Arts

October 5, 2014

Additional thanks to program hosts

Chuck Little

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THE FREER HOUSE



DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

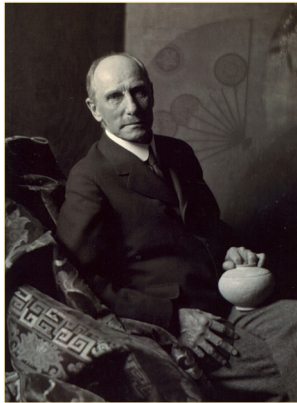


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Detroit Institute of Arts





Charles Lang Freer, 1915.
 Photograph by Edward Steichen.
 George Eastman House,
 International Museum of
 Photography and Film.



Freer House, 1906.
 Photograph by C.M. Hayes.
 Freer Gallery of Art Archives,
 Smithsonian Institution.



Freer Gallery of Art, 1950.
 Library of Congress.

Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919)

Born in Kingston, N.Y., Freer came to Detroit in 1880 to establish the Peninsular Car Works, a railroad freight car manufacturing company, with Frank J. Hecker. In 1890, the young industrialist and art collector commissioned Wilson Eyre, Jr., of Philadelphia, to design his Ferry Avenue home. A collaboration of client, architect and artists, the house reflected Freer's ideals of harmony, simplicity, and surface beauty.

His fortune secure, Freer devoted his life to the study of art. His acquisitions included paintings by the American artists Dewing, Tryon and Thayer, and the largest collection of works by James McNeill Whistler. Encouraged by Whistler to explore aesthetic points of contact between East and West, Freer expanded his interests to Asia and the Middle East, establishing one of the world's greatest collections of Asian art.

Visitors from around the world came to Detroit to meet Freer and view his home and collection. Freer was a major cultural force in the city, actively supporting Pewabic Pottery, the Detroit Museum of Art (today's DIA), the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts (today's College for Creative Studies), and the University of Michigan. In 1906, Freer signed an agreement with the Smithsonian to bequeath his collection to the nation. From 1906-1919, his Detroit home served as the original Freer Gallery of Art. Upon his death in 1919, Freer's collection was moved to Washington, D.C., to be housed at the Freer Gallery of Art, America's first national art museum.

Freer's home was acquired in 1921 by the Merrill-Palmer School. Today, the house is listed on the City of Detroit, State of Michigan and National Register of Historic Places. Freer House Members, Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute and Wayne State University are dedicated to preserving and restoring this internationally significant historic structure.

To help support the Freer House or join as a member,
 please call 313.664.2500, or contact

William Colburn at william.colburn@wayne.edu or Rose Foster at rmfoster@wayne.edu.

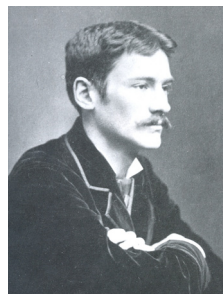
ARTISTS AND FREER'S GARDEN



The Four Sylvan Sounds, 1896-1897
Thomas Wilmer Dewing. Oil on wood panels
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Freer Gallery of Art, F1906.72.

"At home in Detroit, Freer had discovered the benefits of moving from his art gallery to his garden, cultivated as carefully as his collections, where he could meditate in peace upon the works of art he had studied indoors."

Linda Merrill, *Freer: A Legacy of Art*



Thomas Wilmer Dewing, c.1880-1890
Stark & Co. (Firm).
Charles Lang Freer Papers,
Freer Gallery of Art,
Smithsonian Institution.



Maria Oakey Dewing, between 1875 and 1885
Fratelli Vianelli (Firm).
Thomas Wilmer Dewing
and Dewing Family Papers,
Archives of American Art,
Smithsonian Institution.



Maria Oakey Dewing tends her gardens in Cornish, New Hampshire, c.1885 -1905, photographer unknown.
Thomas Wilmer Dewing and Dewing Family Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Poppies and Italian Mignonettes, 1891
Maria Oakey Dewing. oil on canvas. Originally owned by Charles Lang Freer, now in a private collection.

To create a truly unique garden, Freer turned to his friend, Tonalist painter Thomas Wilmer Dewing. In a letter to industrialist William G. Mather about his Ferry Avenue garden, Freer noted that the "original outlines and color schemes were created by my good friend, T.W. Dewing." Well known for his interest in horticulture, Dewing created a plan that blended Eastern and Western plant varieties to create a lush, leafy landscape.

Maria Oakey Dewing, wife of Thomas Wilmer Dewing, was also an accomplished painter and amateur botanist who felt that in order to paint landscapes an artist must have "a long apprenticeship in the garden." When she visited Freer's home in 1892, she, Dewing, Dwight Tryon, and William C. Lebrocq applied extraordinary decorative paint treatments to the interior surfaces to complement paintings being created specifically for the house. Given Oakey Dewing's expert knowledge of plants and interior design, it seems likely that she played a part with her husband in planning Freer's original garden.

Wilson Eyre, Jr., the renowned Philadelphia architect, whom Freer described as “every inch an artist,” designed Freer’s shingle style house and created the basic layout of the garden. With the active hand of landscaper, Eutrope Ferrand, Freer’s city lot was planted to give the illusion of being larger than its actual size, creating the feel of a rambling country estate.

Portrait of Eyre, ca. 1902.
Philadelphia and Notable Philadelphians
by Moses King, New York: Blanchard Press,
Isaac H. Blanchard Co., 1901., p. 87.



Wilson Eyre, Jr., at his Drafting Table.
“Wilson Eyre, Master Draftsman,”
Pencil Points, July 1925, v. 7, 43.

AN ARCHITECT AND FREER’S GARDEN



Freer House, 1906. Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Proposal for Freer House
addition and landscaping,
1904 watercolor on brown paper,
Wilson Eyre, Jr.,
Detroit Institute of Arts.



Freer House, 1892.

Taken just after construction, this image shows the Freer House before the garden was installed.
Collection of Thomas W. Brunk.



Freer House and Garden, 1904.

This view provides a sense of the gardens and landscape from 1893-1904, before construction of the rear addition to Freer's home.

Photograph by C.M. Hayes, University of Glasgow Special Collections.



Freer House and Stables Showing Rose Bushes and Garden, 1904.

The row of rose bushes, recommended to Freer by artist Thomas W. Dewing, created a beautiful border running from E. Ferry Avenue to the stables.
Photograph by C.M. Hayes, 1904. University of Glasgow Special Collections.



Hecker and Freer Carriage Houses and Garden, 1904.

The carriage houses belonging to Freer (R) and Hecker (L) sit side-by-side, reflecting the friendship of these two business partners and neighbors. Note the elegantly curved path of crushed stone leading from E. Ferry Avenue to the rear stables and carriage house.

Photograph by C.M. Hayes, 1904. University of Glasgow Special Collections.



1904 Proposal for Freer House Addition and Landscaping.

Although the garden elements of this plan by architect Wilson Eyre, Jr., were not specifically followed, the rendering shows how the new addition in 1906 transformed the space into a courtyard garden.
Watercolor on brown paper, Wilson Eyre, Jr., 1904. Gift of Louisa Eyre, Detroit Institute of Arts.



Freer House and Garden Post Addition, 1906.

Freer's garden changed to accommodate a major addition at the rear of the house in 1906. Whistler's Peacock Room was installed in the section at the far left.

Charles Lang Freer Papers, Freer Gallery of Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Freer's garden lantern,
today located outside
the Freer Gallery of Art,
on the National Mall,
Washington, D.C.



Charlie Warring, son of Freer's caretaker, stands beside the Asian stone lantern in the Freer House garden, c. 1919. *Collection of Thomas W. Brunk.*

After the new addition to the house in 1906, the visual focus of the garden was an ornamental Asian stone lantern given as a Christmas gift to Freer in 1905 from his friend Sadajirō Yamanaka (1865-1936), a respected international dealer in works of Japanese and Asian art with showrooms in Kyoto, Tokyo, Beijing, London, Boston, and New York.

Replication of the original stone lantern, today located outside the Freer Gallery of Art on the Mall in Washington, D.C., is a priority goal and focal point of the Freer House Garden Plan.

THE MERRILL-PALMER YEARS



Merrill-Palmer Play Yard , c. 1940s.

Merrill-Palmer Audio Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University



Merrill-Palmer Play Yard, 1927.

Merrill-Palmer Audio Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.



Freer House Garden designed by Eleanor L. Roche, 1965.

Merrill-Palmer Audio Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

In 1920, the Merrill-Palmer School of Detroit acquired the Freer House. The gardens and courtyard were converted into an outdoor play lot for the nursery school children enrolled in its progressive early childhood education program. Swing sets and sandboxes replaced the plants and shrubs as fresh air and exercise were seen as integral to healthy growth. When Merrill-Palmer constructed new buildings in 1958, the playground was relocated. In 1965, landscape architect Eleanor L. Roche designed a minimalist green garden for the space. A small fountain with a bronze sculpture was surrounded by geometric planting patterns and slate pathways echoing the stone walls of the house. The stairs leading up to the Peacock Room were enlarged and the original railing was removed.

THE PEACOCK ROOM PORCH RAILING RESTORATION



Merrill-Palmer Play Yard Showing Original Peacock Room Railing, 1927.
Merrill-Palmer Audio Visual Archive, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.



Today - Peacock Room porch with altered railing and steps.
Freer House Archives, Wayne State University.

One of the main goals of the Freer House Garden Revitalization Project is to recreate the original Peacock Room Porch Railing that was removed by Merrill-Palmer (see photo above, left.) The original design has been reviewed by a skilled ironworker who has developed a plan to recreate and reinstall the railing. Restoring the railing will be a significant addition to the Freer House garden. For more information or to donate, contact William Colburn, Director, The Freer House, at william.colburn@wayne.edu or 313-664-2500.

THE FREER HOUSE GARDEN REVITALIZATION PROJECT

The garden is not only integral to the history and restoration of the Freer House, it is also significant as an important piece of American landscape history. Its design, influenced by an architect, a horticulturalist, and artists, provided a harmonious setting for Freer's home and his Asian and American art collection.

The restored garden will be an inviting setting for quiet contemplation and outdoor events for the Freer House, Wayne State, and the community. The plan will reintroduce the gentle arc of Freer's original carriage path as a walkway from Ferry Street and restore the garden using trees and plants authentic to Freer's aesthetic vision but with sustainable, low level maintenance requirements. It will also replicate and reinstall the long lost Peacock Room porch railings and add a newly designed yet historically compatible garden fence and gate.

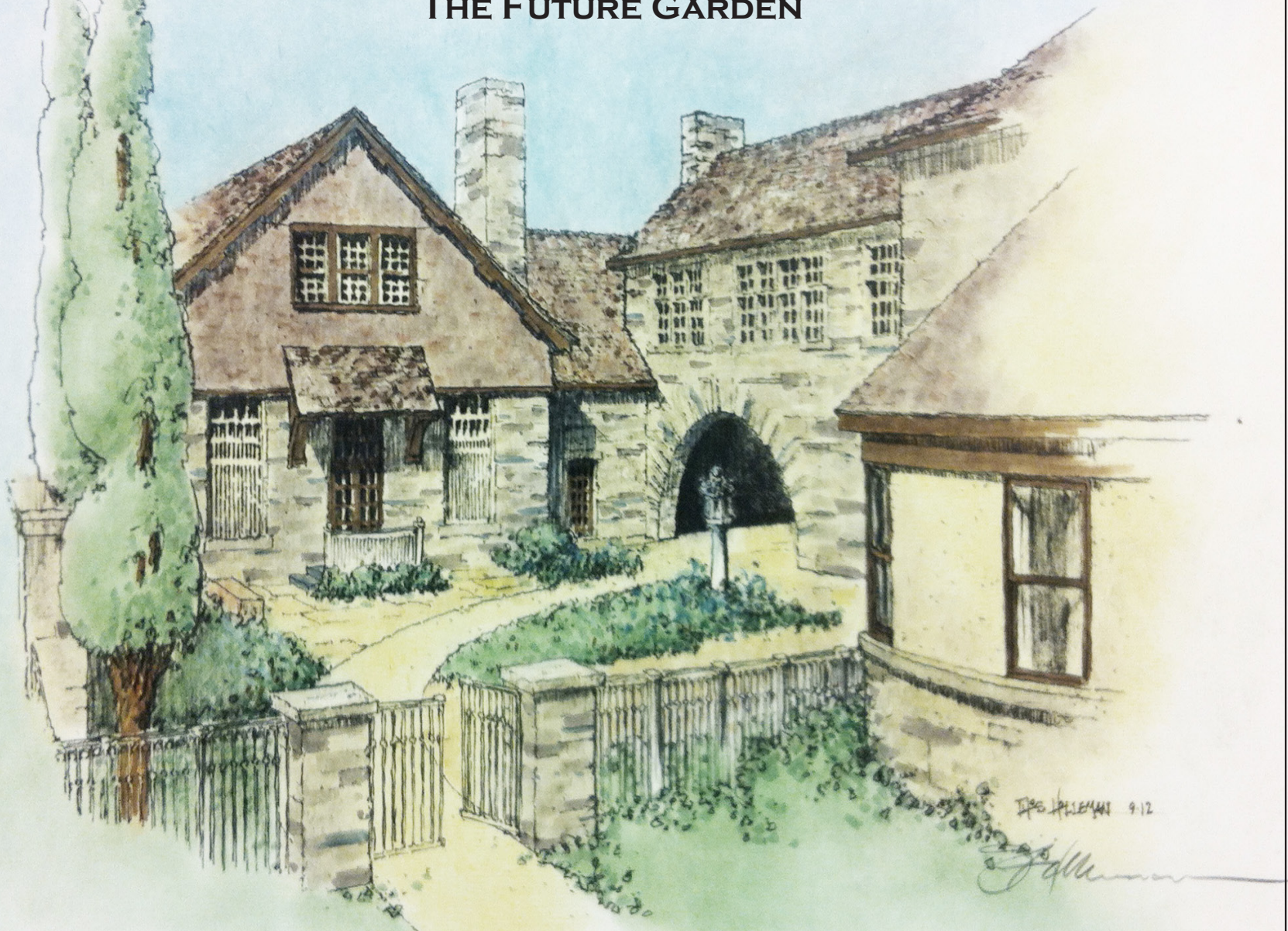


Today - The Freer House Garden.



Future - Conceptual rendering of the restored Freer House garden. Thomas Holleman, 2012.

THE FUTURE GARDEN

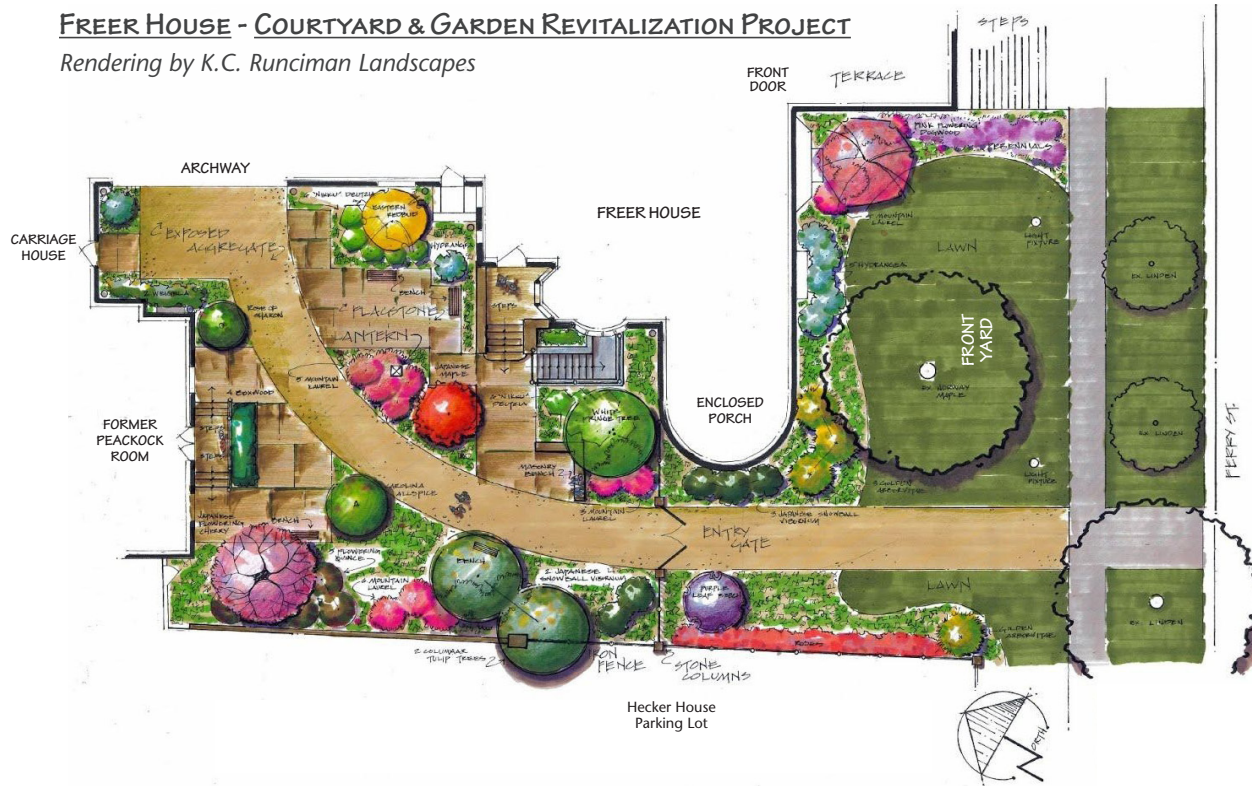


Conceptual Rendering of the Revitalized Freer House Garden.

This rendering envisions what the Freer House garden will look like with plantings, a new fence, and a replica of Freer's Asian stone lantern. *Rendering by Thomas Holleman, 2012.*

FREER HOUSE - COURTYARD & GARDEN REVITALIZATION PROJECT

Rendering by K.C. Runciman Landscapes



FUTURE GARDEN PLAN

Historical authenticity is an important focus of the Freer House Garden Revitalization Project. Using original plant lists, surviving photographs, and historical accounts, the Garden Project Committee researched each layer of the garden's history. The design plan incorporates elements of both the 1893 and 1906 Freer House gardens, using plants and trees authentic to Freer's vision but updated to create an accessible, sustainable, low-maintenance environment.

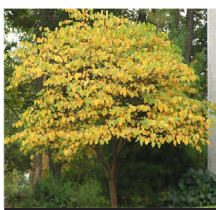
"Japan contributes to make the Freer place a joy forever, as does Virginia, and Scotland and France. So does distant China and Colorado and also the plants of our own Michigan. In essence, the Freer garden is evidence of the owner's extensive travels and it would indeed be a dull man who, working in this wonderful garden, would yawn."

-Detroit News Sunday Tribune, September 5, 1897

Japanese Maple



Eastern Redbud



Japanese Flowering Cherry



Ginkgo



Purple Beech



Pink Flowering Dogwood



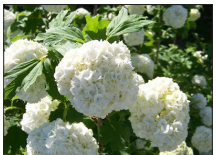
Linden Tree



Rose of Sharon



Japanese Snowball



Carolina Allspice



Golden Arborvitae



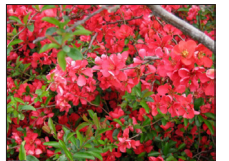
Mountain Laurel



Hydrangea



Japanese Flowering Quince



CULTIVATE HISTORY

Revitalizing Freer's Gardens and Help Beautify Detroit

Financial contributions are needed and welcome! Individual and corporate sponsorship levels to support the garden's restoration are available. For information call William Colburn, Director, The Freer House, at 313-664-2500, william.colburn@wayne.edu, or Rose Foster at rmfoster@wayne.edu

The Freer House Garden Revitalization Committee

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Project Design Plan Consultant

Fred Knight, K.C. Runciman Landscapes

In Memoriam



Denise Little

The Freer House Garden Revitalization Project is dedicated to the memory of Denise Little, a vibrant leader and active member of the Freer House Garden Project Committee. As an artist, entrepreneur and volunteer, Denise was committed to restoring the gardens at the historic Freer House and creating a place of beauty for all to enjoy. The Freer House, Wayne State and the Garden Project Committee will continue to fulfill Denise's vision for this exciting project.