

Cultivation





● by Beth D'Addono

# Gracious LIVING

*This spring, step back in time and experience  
legendary hospitality.*

Sometimes, old ways are best. This spring—a season that wraps Winterthur in color, texture, and fragrance—visitors will take a journey to a more elegant era. Throughout the garden and inside the former home of Henry Francis and Ruth Wales du Pont, the emphasis is placed squarely on the family's legacy of gracious hospitality during idyllic country weekend escapes in the early to mid-20th century. Such brief but lively getaways incorporated the splendor of the natural world and an extraordinary house dedicated to comfort and timeless beauty.

## *Elegant Entertaining*

The list of literati, influential political figures, socialites, captains of industry, and royalty that crossed Winterthur's threshold every spring reads like a who's who of the era. The du Ponts entertained on a grand scale at the estate before moving into the "Cottage" in 1951. But even in that more modest residence, located just steps from the main house, they hosted the likes of Prince Rainier of Monaco, David Rockefeller, and Jacqueline Kennedy for festive gatherings and special dinners.

"Mr. du Pont was well known for his attention to the most minute details," explains Maggie Lidz, Winterthur's estate historian. In spring, rooms would be given a fresh look, with a change of slipcovers, textiles, and other details of décor. In each room, guests would be greeted by H. F. du Pont's signature lush flower arrangements.

Du Pont himself oversaw the dining room table settings, choosing the perfect pattern from his 50 sets of antique china to coordinate with flowers, glassware, and linens. Guests' needs were anticipated and graciously met, making a weekend at the du Pont home a truly memorable experience. ▶



Clockwise from left: Enjoy the view in the garden; a visit to the Enchanted Woods; a ride on the garden tram.

In 1923, the year that du Pont fervently started collecting decorative pieces and furnishings made or marketed in America, he turned his eye to the display of his collection. Eventually, he created innovative museum-style settings and lived among his treasures.

Visitors to Winterthur can now imagine themselves as guests in the du Pont home, experiencing the gracious country estate through a series of guided tours specific to

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their interests. Some tours focus on the lifestyle of the du Ponts and their guests in the early 20th century; others appeal to visitors fascinated by antiques. With advance notice, groups can focus on a particular aspect of the collection, such as ceramics or furniture.

### *Garden Perspectives*

When H. F. du Pont showed his garden to his guests, it was with more than simple pride of ownership. The master of the house was passionate about his estate, his use of color, texture, and form trans-

forming an already beautiful setting into a show-stopping Eden. Set in a 1,000-acre preserve of rolling meadows, woodlands, streams, and forest, Winterthur’s 66-acre cultivated garden is a highlight.

“Mr. du Pont gave as much time and attention to planning his garden as he did to his interior collections,” says Linda Eirhart, Winterthur’s curator of plants and assistant director of horticulture. “His knowledge of plants, sense of color,

and careful planning for successive bloom make this garden a very special place.”

And no time is more special than spring, when swaths of color transform the hillsides into a natural wonderland. In Azalea Woods, hundreds of the flowering shrubs are planted in dramatic masses over eight acres, suffusing the woodland in drifts of deep rose, crimson, lavender-mauve, and cherry red. Against the stately columns of grand old oaks and tulip-poplars, spring blooms are set off by a carpet of wildflowers such as trillium, wild phlox, and Virginia bluebells. In the

Peony Garden, a famed collection of prized cultivars blooms from mid-May to early June.

Besides exploring the magnificent garden, visitors can experience the estate through a 20-minute narrated garden tram tour, taking in a snapshot of du Pont’s horticultural vision.

This spring the tram’s route will follow the path du Pont preferred when he motored guests through his garden. “The route makes a big circle around the house and through the garden,” explains Karen Steenhoek, supervisor of garden and estate tours. “It offers a stunning view of the house that, to me, gives it the feel of the home that it was, not just the house as a museum.”

The new route offers several advantages. Guests go directly from the Visitor Center to the tram, and within minutes of buying a ticket they are immersed in an interpretive experience.

The tram makes several stops, allowing guests to get off and explore further on foot. Those with children are sure to appreciate the easy access to the Enchanted Woods, where all ages can play in the Tulip Tree House or hide in the Faerie Cottage.

### *Traveling in Style*

In du Pont’s day, weekends were prime



Above: Port Royal Entrance Hall with H. F. du Pont's Rolls Royce outside; below: azalea blossoms.

time for entertaining. You would have seen a fleet of luxury automobiles such as Cadillacs, Rolls-Royces, Pierce-Arrows, Buicks, Lincolns, and Packards. The motorcars—some owned by the du Ponts, others by their well-to-do guests—represented some of the finest examples of the golden age of transportation, as wealthy Americans took to the road, traveling in high style as never before.

On Saturdays from April 21 to June 2, visitors will find high-style antique automobiles near the Port Royal entrance to the du Ponts' house. Organized by Gregory J. Landrey, Winterthur's interim head of library, collections management, and academic programs, the display is designed to give guests a sense of how important automobiles were to the du Pont family and their weekend visitors.

"Transportation to, from, and around an estate of this size required a substantial number of vehicles," says Landrey, "and of course, no ordinary car would do." Over the course of five decades, from 1916 until du Pont's death in 1969, the estate's eight garage bays housed more than 40 luxury motorcars, including 33 Cadillacs, five Buicks, three Rolls-Royces, one LaSalle, and one Oldsmobile. The family maintained a chauffeur pool of four, with six additional employees working as mechanics

and driving maintenance vehicles.

Each Saturday this spring, various models of a single marque, from Rolls-Royces to Packards, will be on display at the estate.

"Unlike a traditional antique automobile show, we're displaying the vehicles parked around the house," says Landrey. "That's to give the sense that there are guests at the house, as there were most weekends when the du Ponts lived here."

This spring, visitors will find it easier than ever to imagine the life and times of Henry Francis and Ruth Wales du Pont. Their legacy isn't one that is frozen in time or defined by a particular age or decade. Instead, through Winterthur's captivating collections of decorative arts and the striking seasonal displays of du Pont's prized garden, this influential family's vision remains timeless and very much alive. ❖

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Some of the woodworkers at Ed Sharpless Woodshop, Jenner's Pond. Back row (l to r): Lou Rafetto, Thayer Landis, Frank Hoenigman, Walter Bergmann, Allen Jones, Phil Donohoe, Ollie Littleton, Wallace Butterworth, and Chuck Chilcott; front row (l to r): Lawry Gullick and Jack Davis.

## POINTING THE WAY

*There's no chance of missing the estate's horticultural highlights this spring thanks to a group of 13 woodworkers who reside at Jenner's Pond, a retirement community in nearby Jennersville, Pennsylvania. The group—led by Henry "Chuck" Chilcott—have made arrows similar to those H. F. du Pont displayed beginning in the 1950s to guide visitors to peak blooms in the garden.*

*Credit for the idea goes to John Feliciani, director of horticulture, who felt visitors would benefit from the reinstatement of a tradition that ceased in the late 1970s. —S.W.*



Winterthur's "bloom hotline" offers information on current garden highlights. Call 302.888.4856 to hear updates on what's in bloom or visit [www.winterthur.org](http://www.winterthur.org).