

Learning from Dragon Rock

Whatever Became of Russel Wright's Inspired Attempt to Design a Forest Garden by Managing Plant Succession?

“If it had been built in Japan, Manitoga would be a national monument, visited by processions of pilgrims,” wrote Ian McHarg shortly before his death in 2001. “Japan has many such sites . . . but the United States has only Manitoga, the temple to managed succession, inspired ecological design.”

McHarg was among the many admirers of the 75-acre “forest garden” that industrial designer Russel Wright (1904–1976) created over the course of three decades on a former granite quarry in Garrison, New York. Surrounded by hemlock and oak woods, Wright’s modernist house and studio perched on a ledge above a waterfall and quarry pool, which he created by diverting a stream. The dramatically sited buildings and their immediate surroundings formed Manitoga’s core, known as Dragon Rock. (The site and the buildings’ integration of indoor and outdoor space have evoked comparisons to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater, but Fallingwater’s house dominates its surroundings, while the buildings at Dragon Rock recede into the landscape. The two Wrights, incidentally, were not related.)

When he died, Russel Wright left his property to The Nature Conservancy with the intent that it be open to the public as a center of nature education and a showcase of environmental design. In 1982, Carol



by Jane Roy Brown
Photograph by Bill Regan

Levy Franklin, FASLA, a principal of Andropogon Associates in Philadelphia, prepared a 220-page management guide containing detailed instructions about how to maintain the effects Wright intended. (Franklin is also a cousin of Wright.) In 1984, The Nature Conservancy relinquished the property to a small nonprofit organization, Manitoga Inc.

Today, almost 30 years after Wright’s death, extraordinary beauty still reigns in Manitoga’s landscape, owing to the diversity of the property’s topography and microclimates. Masses of mountain laurel bloom in June, an emerald blanket of moss covers the bank above the quarry pool, and witch hazel and spicebush light up the stream corridor with brilliant fall color.

But scores of dead hemlocks (*Tsuga canadensis*) litter the slopes, victims of a devastating infestation of the hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*), an insect pest native to Japan. The hemlock deaths will eventually open approximately half of the property’s canopy, altering Wright’s carefully orchestrated design effects, which relied on the trees to frame vistas, provide four-season greenery, and screen out unwanted views. . . .