

History of Water Gardening Spa

Viewing through the window to the past, the beauty of water gardening appeared in Colorado about the turn of the last century. Written history, in word and pictures, tells us that during the first three decades of the 1900's, three major public water garden displays were created in the Metro area.

Around 1900 the Reverend J.H. Houghton, pastor of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Denver, purchased a country home in Englewood named Rexleigh. For the next 15 years, using "marriage fees," he improved the home, built ponds and brought water lilies to Colorado. He solved a primary question of those from the Eastern

horsecar. Parishioners, and especially the children, were extended an invitation often to visit during warm months. Houghton desired to share the educational value of botany and zoology with children. Not only did they see the lilies in labeled pots, but he also had an unusual collection of turtles for the children to enjoy.

Rev. Houghton's desire to share his lily ponds was like "opening the gold mine of pleasure (from lily ponds) for Coloradoans," and resulted in the opening of the Rexleigh Water Garden Company in 1916. In a four-page leaflet, his first offerings included a listing of 57 varieties to view and 8 available for purchase. A florist's market at Rexleigh's offered cut flowers from the grounds, including water lilies. In 1917, after 25 years of service, he left his position as rector of St. Marks Episcopal Church to head a new Mission Church of St. George in Englewood. Rexleigh's Water Garden Company offerings grew that year to 49 hardy lily plants, 19 tropical lily plants, and a dozen more available for viewing. A road was placed for "drive through" learning in the lily pool area. Visitors



Catalog cover 1916

United States - "Could pond lilies be grown in the highest West?" He found the answer to be "yes," and in 1903 it was reported in society pages that Rexleigh was the garden spot of Denver. It was built on a sloping hillside. At the top was the home, with green lawn down to meet the City Ditch, which formed an "ox bow" on the grounds. The ditch provided water to the multiple pools Houghton built for the lilies. Delightful gardens of cutting flowers were spread throughout Rexleigh. Part of the delight in visiting Rexleigh was getting there. Visitors would have a unique ride on the Cherrelyn



City Park Lily



City Park Lily Lake 1920

ans Over 100 Years in Colorado

were invited to view the lilies any time June 1 through August 15. Lilies available for purchase were priced at \$.25 to \$25. By Houghton's own admission, "no one would want to invest such sums until they see the flowers."



Lake 1921



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Rev. Houghton died at the age of 70, in 1918, at Rexleigh.



Denver City Park supervisor, Mr. J. L. Russell, visited Rexleigh in 1916 and left with an armload of lilies for a barren, mosquito-infested City Park Lake. It was Russell's visit that spurred Houghton to start the commercial venture. In 1917, an additional \$500 worth of lilies were

purchased from Rexleigh's to increase the number of blooms in the lily pond. Tropical lily varieties were included in the purchase. It was said to be the largest collection West of the Mississippi. In 1919 the pond, located near the 17th Avenue entrance, was overtaken by motor oil washed from the streets during a storm, killing all the lilies. A new lily pond was built in 1925, east and north up the rise from the large lake. Within a year, growth of the lilies filled in to equal the beauty of the original pond. Thousands of blossoms covered the surface daily. This pond survived until 1970, when minimal maintenance was available for their care. It became a shaded, quiet pond with a boundary of trees and shrubs. Cement

foundations in the pond, for placement of the potted lilies, are still visible in the shallow water.



Louis Liebhardt, a well-known Denver real estate and investment businessman, purchased 36.5 acres of prairie land near the foothills in 1899. His intent, as a lifelong bachelor, was to have a place where nieces and nephews could visit and enjoy the outdoors. A frame house was the only improvement on the acreage. His first addition



Rose Acres 1930's

to the property was hundreds of trees. This was only the start of a creation which would become a nationally-known garden called Rose Acres. In 1928 he built a large four-story brick home on the property. His sisters, Dr. Laura Liebhardt and Miss. Minnie Liebhardt, both spinsters, lived with him on the property and assisted with the garden development. The three traveled the world to find unusual plants for their passion for beautiful

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gardens. Lotus from Egypt and lilies from Africa, were among their collection. Water was piped into the property from the mountains to a reservoir that was the first of 14 lakes and ponds developed on the property. A rose garden with 40,000 rose bushes filled the entrance area to the



Rose Acres 1930's

mansion. The water gardens were contiguous, winding throughout the grounds. Revolving cast iron lotus leaf seats were situated along the flagstone pathways. Several drinking fountains scattered on the property were designed to blend with the garden and were designed to look like lotus leaves with a poised bird spouting water from its beak. In a deliberate attempt to attract and protect birds drawn to the natural habitat, Liebhardt hand-carved and painted birdhouses made of gourds in ornate designs to look like frogs and fish. An estimated 500 of these gourd houses were hung in the trees and on the fences.

The Liebhardts created an Oriental theme throughout their garden, including teahouses, Japanese bridges and ornate gold carvings purchased from the St. Louis World's Fair Chinese exhibit. A Shinto Temple of Ho Shan, god of prosperity and happiness, adorned one garden. Ponds were planted with lotus and lilies. It was estimated that 600,000 lotus blossoms bloomed annually. An estimated

150,000 to 300,000 goldfish were in several of the ponds. Baskets with shredded dry bread were placed along the pathways near the ponds for feeding the fish. The sisters prepared 50 loaves daily for feeding. To protect the rare lotus and water lilies, hot water was piped from the boiler room in the basement of the mansion through the ponds to stabilize water temperatures. Plants were brought indoors in September of each year.

One day each week the public had the opportunity to tour the gardens. By invitation only, hundreds of guests were brought to the gardens annually on Wednesdays or Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., July through mid-September. August was suggested as the best month to view the gardens. The invitations stipulated "no kodaks please." A printed booklet with photos of the gardens accompanied each invitation.

At the age of 75, Louis Liebhardt died of a sudden heart attack in 1938. Rose Acres flourished until its sale in 1951. It was buried with a housing development in 1953.

This short history and photos were obtained from the various sources available at the Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, Genealogy Department. Researched by Lois Mayerchak, John Mirgon, and Cyndie Thomas, Colorado Water Garden Society.

CWGS Water Gardening and Pond Expo

Mark your calendars! CWGS will be hosting the first Water Gardening and Pond Expo on September 8, 2002, 12noon - 5 p.m. in Mitchell Hall at the Denver Botanic Gardens.

Planning is in progress for the event and your input is desired. Currently pond design and construction individuals and companies will be invited to display their creations; pond supply vendors will be invited to share their goods; booths to share information on various facets of water gardening will be available.

A special "Pond Walk" through the Denver Botanic Gardens' ponds will be directed by Bruce McLane of Florida Aquatic Nurseries. A program (subject to be determined) will be given by Richard Koogle of Lilypons, sponsored by Aquarium Pharmaceuticals.

If you know of anyone who would like to participate, or if you are willing to volunteer to assist, contact Bo Lindsey at (303) 753-6620 or Nancy Styler at (303)850-7150.