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After Ray Milner died in 1975, Veronica Milner continued to live in the house on the 70-acre estate, working with staff on the gardens until her death in 1998.

PHOTOS, GERALD FILIPSKI

## Secret garden tells a story

## Edmonton couple's retreat on Vancouver Island open for tours

GERALD FILIPSKI  
Special to The Journal  
VANCOUVER ISLAND

The dream of every vacationer is to find that secret spot to call their own, a location known only to a handful of travellers.

Milner Gardens on Vancouver Island is just such a place. Milner is a true jewel that remains hidden from detection by an old growth forest. Driving along the West Island Highway from Parksville to Qualicum Beach, you might miss the entrance to the gardens. It is so well hidden by the forest that it is easy to simply drive by.

The gardens get their name from Ray Milner and his wife Veronica and have an Edmonton connection. Ray, among his many career accomplishments, was a partner in the prominent Edmonton law firm of Milner and Steer. Ray purchased the estate in 1937 and it became his retreat from the rigours of the lawyer's life. Ray and his first wife Rina began working on the garden but Rina died in 1952.

When Ray remarried two years later, his second wife Veronica assumed responsibility for most of the horticultural development of the estate. Ray retired out to the estate in 1969 at the age of 80 and died in 1975.

Veronica was quite the character from all reports and her life and eccentricities make for fascinating reading in a book by Margaret Cadwaladr entitled *Veronica's Garden* (Madrona Books 2002).

Jim Cadwaladr, executive director of Milner Gardens, worked for Veronica in his younger days. "She was very specific in how her garden was to be laid out. It was to be informal and yet it had a flow to it as one area blended into the next," says Jim.

Among Veronica's many affiliations with garden associations was her membership in the University of Alberta's De-

vonian Botanical Garden. "She would accompany Ray on his many overseas business trips," Jim recalls, "and she would collect plants from all over the world and bring them home or have them shipped home." Her collections created a garden extremely diverse and yet fascinating because of the variety of plants.

Jim and Margaret Cadwaladr remember Veronica despised the "evil practices" of the formality of the gardens of the time with their manicured lawns. She would not tolerate any mass plantings of "vulgar" bedding plants. Veronica wanted her garden to be "in tune with the infinite" and to be a place of serenity, elegance, rhythm and harmony. She often said, "this is a garden and not a park."

Veronica viewed the garden through an accomplished artist's eye. Her botanical pastels and oils can be seen in the Milner home still.

In 1996, the estate was donated to the Malaspina University College in Nanaimo and Veronica continued to live in the house on the estate until she died in 1998. The college makes use of the garden as a learning tool and the goal is to maintain the garden in perpetuity for education and the community's benefit in Ray Milner's memory.

The Milner legacy lives on in the Milner Gardens and Woodland (MGW). The MGW receives support from a restricted endowment managed by the university that also offers some administrative and support services. But the garden lives on mainly through donations and admission fees as a non-profit organization.

Of the 70-acre estate, 10 acres are developed into garden with 60 acres being forest. The forest adds so much to the charm of this garden. Upon arriving at the entrance, you have the choice of walking the road directly to the garden or being driven on the garden's shuttle cart.

You may also choose the path that

wanders through the forest on its way to the garden gate. This path is a wonderful walk back in time through the old growth cedar and Douglas fir forest. The forest is a quiet place to reflect as you walk along and you cannot help but feel how fortunate you are to be in one of the last stands of old growth forest.

Halfway to the garden you come upon a wooden sidewalk that takes you to a viewpoint in the trees. Directly in front of you and high up in a tree sits an active bald eagle's nest. It is only one of the special moments that Milner Gardens can offer.

The woodlands offer a serenity and peace that are difficult to duplicate anywhere else.

Once in the garden it is easy to imagine what it would have been like to be a Milner. The path that runs by the swimming pool and pool house, which now houses

The Himalayan blue poppy, just one the more exotic varieties of flowers featured in the the gardens just off the West Island Highway.

the gift shop, leads to the house that is special in its own right.

Incorporating some of the features of Ceylonese tea plantations in the British Empire every bedroom has a bathroom with a screen door that exits out into the garden. The house, which was completed in 1931, is 6500 square feet.

You can enjoy tea in the Camelia tea room just as Diana, Princess of Wales, and Prince Charles did in 1986 and Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip did in 1987 when they stayed with the Milners.

Veronica's mother was a cousin of Winston Churchill; Great Britain's wartime prime minister and Veronica were both direct descendants from the first Duke of Marlborough and thus were related to Diana, Princess of Wales.

From the front veranda of the house

you look out onto the Strait of Georgia and beyond to the Coast Mountains of the British Columbia mainland through the windows in the trees Veronica had cut down so judiciously. The view is breathtaking.

The public is allowed to tour several of the rooms in the house and although no one lives there any longer, it still looks lived in with the personal touches of Veronica so very evident. The historical photos that hang in the same place where Veronica had hung them and her paintings, the artifacts and mementoes of royal visits add to the ambience of the home.

The multi-layered forest canopy casts a dense shadow over much of the garden.

See MILNER GARDENS / L2



The Milners shared their Vancouver Island paradise with visiting royalty, but left it for public enjoyment in perpetuity.

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# Information enough for plant lovers, beauty enough for all

## MILNER GARDENS

Continued from L1

But in this understory lives the extensive collection of rare rhododendrons and so many of the fine specimen trees.

Although there are several formal areas with lawns and edging plants as well as orchard and berry gardens it is the melding of the natural forest with Veronica's 'natural garden' that is so very impressive.

The Japanese maples, Stewartia, Davidia, beeches, Laburnum, Katsura, dawn redwood and birches seem so at home in this garden along with the towering Douglas firs.

You don't have to be a horticultural type to enjoy this garden. The colours, views and beauty speak for themselves. As a plant nut I loved the place because every plant has a label. There is no having to guess what this variety is.

In fact, I would have to say that I enjoyed my visit to the Milner more than even the famed Burchart Gardens. Five hundred varieties of rhododendrons alone has a way of affecting you.

One of the interesting programs that the Milner Gardens run is called Roots

patient with each other now than they ever were before."

Many locals and visitors agree there is a new shine on the Apple's collective personality. According to Daniel Cowper, a

and Shoors. Jim Cadwaladr speaks proudly of the program that brings together seniors and children in the common bond of gardening. "The seniors teach the children how to plant, grow and tend the Roots and Shoors garden," says Jim, "The seniors are the roots and the kids are the shoors."

The gardens are open Thursdays through Sundays and holiday Mondays April 1 - May 9 and Sept. 9 - Oct. 11 and seven days a week from May 10 to Sept. 6. Admission is \$10 for adults and \$6 for students.

Children under 12 are free. In addition to the tearoom there is the gift shop and you can even buy containerized plants that are grown from seeds or cuttings from the plants you see in the garden. The nursery that the Milner Gardens staff uses for growing the plants is within the Milners' old tennis court.

Milner Gardens and Woodland are a true jewel of the island and are a definite must-see. This is one secret spot that I am happy to share.

*Gerald Filipksi is a freelance gardening writer whose columns appear regularly in The Journal.*

pass a thoughtful afternoon. Articulate tour guides — sober young men and women fluent in several different languages — lead small multicultural groups through the premises, explain-

— toward an unseen but highly anticipated future. From a tourist's point of view, that makes New York a never-ending story: no matter how frequently you visit, it is never the same city twice.

CanWest News Service



For those who want more than an immersion in beautiful colour, every plant at the Milner Gardens is identified by a label.

GERALD FILIPSKI

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