Secret Gardens
SINCERE GRATITUDE TO........
The owners of our homes and gardens. Bless 'em.
  Our artists
  Our vendors
  Our staff
  Our pastry chefs

JoAnn Ball/Arthur Strawbridge
Marilyn Bowlin/Jim Eberle
Marianne Brady/Harry Allister
Barbara Fuller/Mary Della Salla
Julian Hamer/Fred Cone
Betty McAndrews
Nancy Piwowar
Rosemary Schlosser
Nancy Smythe
Bernice Swain
Jeannie Turner
David Willis
Michael Wroble

Finance
Staffing
Art and Design
Communications
Staging
Publicity
Photography
Museum Store
I. D. Badges
Hospitality
Curator
Security
Program Design

Harold W. Mitchell, Mayor
Plainfield City Council
Plainfield Department of Public Works
Plainfield Garden Club
Plainfield Public Library
United National Bank

"It was the sweetest, most mysterious looking place anyone could imagine..."

The Secret Garden
Frances Hodgson Burnett
1912

As the earth stirs and wakens to a new season of bloom, we welcome you to Plainfield's secret gardens and the homes of those who tend them with loving care.

Come, enter the secret garden and leave life's cares behind.

The Historical Society of Plainfield
602 West Front Street
Plainfield, New Jersey 07060-1004
(908) 755-5831

Dorothe Pollard
Tour Chairman
NO. 1
THE DRAKE HOUSE MUSEUM
602 West Front Street

"They had some of the roses that had been there when Drake had the place, when General Washington was there."
-- Harberger Family Journal

Welcome to the Drake House, city-owned headquarters of the Historical Society of Plainfield. This grand, old house wears its years with grace and pride, reflecting within the rooms it shelters successive stages in its evolution through 246 years of Plainfield's history.

The Drake family kitchen appears as it was when Isaac Drake raised the farmhouse for his eldest son, Nathaniel, in 1746, and as it -- and the nearby Queen Anne dining room -- remained throughout the years of the Revolutionary War. In contrast, a gracious parlor has been furnished as it might have been in the Late Empire/Early Victorian era, mirroring the lifestyle of a well-to-do gentleman farmer. The bedroom bearing Washington's name commemorates the General's visits with the Drakes. Family papers relate he rested on his cot in this room when the house served as his command post on another hot day in June, 215 years ago.

The Harberger Library, c. 1868, pays homage to the Victorian Period, period of the home's transformation from simple farmhouse to elegant country home -- the guise it wears today. As our plans to present the house within a suitable setting progress, perhaps it would be appropriate to create 19th century-style gardens here, for Harberger papers point the way.

John Harberger "developed his land into a paradise of a garden," with many "beautiful fruit trees. He loved it." The driveway was "quite a flowering circle," and at its end was a greenhouse, filled with "all sorts of fruit trees, palm trees and everything." When restoration of the house has been completed and our energies turn toward renovation of the grounds, should we include a place for quiet contemplation, a refuge, our own secret garden?

Enhancing our tour of "Secret Gardens," the Drake House blooms inside and out. Antique quilts provide a flowery background for garden party dresses and summer whites. A flurry of lacy petticoats resembles a bed of lily-of-the-valley, and we can almost feel a breeze against our cheek from the dainty fans on display. Even the dolls are enjoying their own garden party in the ballroom.

All these lovely, delicate garments highlight the skill required to lighten and brighten aging fabrics. Pause at our demonstration table for information on the care of antique cottons and linens, then visit the museum gift shop for the necessary materials.

Antique quilts courtesy of Marty Samek, 1717 Woodland Avenue, Edison, N.J. 08817 (908) 753-8553
"I know a bank where the wild thyme blows
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses with egantine
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight."

-- A Midsummer Night's Dream

We owe an enduring debt of gratitude to the members of the Shakespeare Society, the Plainfield Garden Club and the Union County Park Commission who, in 1927, banded together to create the Shakespeare Garden along the banks of the Cedar Brook. The concept of gardens planted with flowers mentioned in Shakespearean verse developed in Stratford-On-Avon, and has been embraced with enthusiasm wherever the Bard's words are read and loved.

Plainfield's treasured garden was designed by Olmstead Brothers, a renowned firm of landscape architects of Brookline, Massachusetts, with 17 geometrical flower beds and two borders 100 feet long. Rocks bolster one side of the garden, while a paling fence covered with roses and clematis lines the opposite side. A vine-wreathed pergola marks the garden's entrance, hawthorn, yew and a mulberry tree provide a screen of privacy and Titania's bank of thyme is embowered in fragrant egantine roses. Whimsical topiary birds, a sundial and dovecote decorate the garden, the latter entwined with the Maiden's Blush rose which clung to the wall of Anne Hathaway's cottage.

More than 40 plants described in Shakespeare's plays and sonnets overflow the beds. Gilliflower, iris, calendula, laurel and cowslip and daisy, lavender, rosemary, hyssop and rue, mint and lemon balm, pansy and cumbeline -- all the sweet, old-fashioned names that play so "tripplingly on the tongue." The Plainfield Garden Club's continuing devotion to the maintenance of the Shakespeare Garden has created a deliciously-scented secret garden for all of us to share.

Now follow the trail of flower-filled watering cans along the garden path to more of Plainfield's lovely and secluded gardens.
"There's some big clumps o' columbine in the garden. They'll look like a bed o' blue and white butterflies flutterin' when they're out. And borders o' mignonette and pinks and pansies and things, whose seeds could be saved from year to year."

-- The Secret Garden

Our journey through Plainfield's secret gardens now leads to the door of a colorful, pattern-shingle, 1894 town house combining both Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styling. Flower-garden colors are a potent decorating tool within the house, which comes alive with the rich, rosy tones of lupine and impatients. Even wood tones are rosy, for red cedar and cherry have been used for trim and floor detail. Flower patterns wrap the walls and upholstery echoes the motif, bursting into full bloom across settee and armchairs. Carving on graceful Victorian furniture repeats the floral forms, vine and trellis carpets the floor and ceiling medallions spread foliate tendrils overhead.

Stained glass, recycled above the music room doors and custom-made for the entry transom, copies the theme of original windows gracing the stairwell. The frothy white of mignonette, favored by our grandmothers for its pungent sweetness, appears in rose-carved mantel, marble-topped tables and filmy lace curtains. It punctuates the vibrant interior much as it did the Victorian garden. Within this mise en scène, the resident gardener may have her cake. And eat it, too!

The back yard, once devoid of any charm, has become a lighthearted, romantic garden designed to capture the sun. In keeping with Victorian taste, neatly-ordered beds are filled with hosta, columbine, peonies, forget-me-nots, lilacs, lilies, iris, roses, clematis, narcissus and impatiens, all carefully labeled for easy identification. Picket and board fences, shrubbery and the walls of neighboring buildings provide the sense of enclosure so essential to a secret garden, and we yearn to daily in the freshly-scented environment skillfully created just a few short paces from the city street. But depart we must along a brick walkway bordered by plants selected to thrive in filtered light, a shady and inviting retreat for coffee and the morning paper.

Artist in the garden:
Thomas Pickle
Millington, N.J.
(908) 647-0575
"And over walls and earth and trees and swinging sprays and tendrils the fair green veil of tender little leaves had crept, and in the grass under the trees were splashes of gold and purple and white."

-- The Secret Garden

Back in 1875, when farmland was fast giving way to suburban residential lots, three town houses were erected across the way from Library Park on speculation. The builder specified identical interior plans, with facades reflecting the wonderful variety of 19th century architecture. The Victorian Eclectic home in the middle of the row, now painted in authentic tones of camel, cream and evergreen to blend with its surroundings, conceals a tranquil garden behind its stalwart presence.

Cascades of climbing hydrangea along the driveway fence mark passage to a shady, hidden garden. Pass under the rustic ivy arbor entwined with roses to a fish pond sheltered under silvery, gray birch -- and the garden is revealed. An amazing wealth of plant material is tucked into this tiny Eden. Brick-edged beds overflow with plants both familiar and unfamiliar, among them astilbe, coneflower, Solomon's seal, autumn flowering crocus and strawberry begonia. Girding a compact lawn -- spangled in spring with the gold of winter aconite and the blue of ajuga -- Olive Smith holly, viburnum, mahonia and jasmine contribute verticle interest to the verdant horizontal plane. Clematis montana trails across the yew and prunus lifts dainty blossoms against the boundary fence, leading the eye to a beautiful hornbeam tree in the yard beyond. Here and there, escapees from established beds have seeded themselves willy-nilly, adding to the casual charm. Hemlocks tower over all, limbed to allow more light to reach the growth below.

Boxwood and andromeda, rhododendron and azalea weave their way throughout the garden and foundation plantings. You'll never note the lack 'midst all the greenery, but a number of robust boxwood left the garden in early May to form the nucleus of new plantings at the Drake House. We're delighted to share the bounty from one of Plainfield's most cherished secret gardens.

At sundown, labors done, slip away to a private corner near the rock garden to await the first fireflies of a summer evening. The garden is at peace, lulled by the gentle trickle of the fountains, the last sleepy chitter of birds gone to rest.

Artist in the garden:
Marianne Brady
Plainfield, N.J.
(908) 755-4515
"Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. Everything is made out of Magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, foxes and badgers and squirrels and people. So it must be all around us. In this garden -- in all the places."

-- The Secret Garden

Handsome pines provide a living frame of privacy for the garden of a storybook, Tudor carriage house, built in 1852 and converted in the 1920s. Terra cotta tiles from the Victorian rose alleé and arbor pave the entrance patio designed during a 1961 restoration -- and here the magic begins as living herbal topiary provides an aromatic welcome.

Visitors are greeted by a mural in the style of Rufus Porter, depicting the landscape of a bygone age when today's secret garden was only a stable yard, a dream unfulfilled. Clear, fresh color prevails within, spiced with nasturtium, marigold, gentian and poppy. The building's original features -- stall doors, wrought iron hardware, exposed brick walls -- have been carefully preserved and transformed into strong decorative elements. Weathered paneling and ancient beams rescued from homes long gone lend architectural interest to the kitchen, and the owner's interior flower garden, a melange of floral paintings, ascends the graceful staircase.

A shed addition opening off the living room, once a potting shed, contains a newly-designed powder room. The hall leads on to an enchanting dining terrace of brick and slate, enhanced by further examples of topiary art. The scent of potted herbs mingles with the fragrance of a culinary herb garden conveniently located just beyond the gate.

Creative discipline is the hallmark of both house and garden. About the grounds, carefully positioned shrubs and evergreens, an espaliered pyracantha and lush island plantings reveal the gardener's affinity for form and texture. And for dramatic staging! The garage, with its eye-catching window boxes, now plays the role of rustic potting shed with panache.

Herb topiary courtesy of
Atlock Flower Farm, Six
Weston Canal Road, Somerset,
N.J. 08873 (908) 356-3373

Artist in the house:
Charles Wren
Westfield, N.J.
(308) 233-8432
A silhouette of living green against the fence is prelude to a 1922 English country house enclosed within a dense barrier of broad-leaf evergreens, and warmly embraced by its colorful perennial garden. An open gate beckons us into a flowering courtyard where a young woodland ditty plays his pipes, roses and clematis climb latticed walls and magnolia shades the tender growth below. We would linger awhile, but the distant music of falling water lures us along stepping stones to the pond beside a shaded pavilion. Below the weeping hemlock, oriental koi perform an underwater ballet among the waterlilies. And look for the bullfrog. Where? Over there, just behind the stems of arrowhead or sunning on his favorite lily pad.

Further down the hill we go, through the multicolored sprawl of an English country garden to the swimming pool. Anemone, bleeding heart, Canterbury bells -- on the flowers romp through phlox, sweet william and verbena to the end of the gardener's lexicon. Evident amid the floral exuberance is the touch of a firm and controlling hand, encouraging and directing the garden symphony.

Enter the house through the garden room, where the flowering world has been captured, visually and verbally, between the enticing covers of books. Find here all the lore, fact, imagery and poetry to which the garden is heir. Bird houses are here, as well, in fancy dress to add a touch of fantasy to either an outdoor or indoor setting.

The home's interior -- gracious, welcoming and serenely comfortable -- plays subtle accompaniment to the abundance lying just beyond its walls. Sunny yellow, trellis patterns and pastel florals distribute airy freshness throughout the house. A spacious kitchen has been transformed from a trio of nondescript rooms into the light-filled surroundings we see today. Each room offers escape to the secret garden, expressing the gardener's wish to be, above all else, outdoors.
"When I dig, I'm not tired at all. I like to smell th' earth when it's turned up. There's naught as nice as th' smell o' good clean earth, except th' smell o' fresh growin' things when th' rain falls on 'em."

-- The Secret Garden

A drive, swathed in daylilies, coralbells and iris, wanders back to the vision of an open, sunlit meadow beside a shady wood. Only steps from an urban intersection lies a naturalist's paradise, alive with the hum of insect life in conversation with the earth. The garden spills over its hillside like a mountain stream, swirling into curling waves of color and quiet eddies of bloom. Residents of the mellow, terraced cottage atop the slope need only step outside to view the world in micro-cosm, secure from unwelcome distractions.

The hand of a scholarly plantsman has been at work on the hill. Plants native to the North American continent coexist happily with varieties from far corners of the globe. Exbury azalea from England stands shoulder to shoulder with Carolina azalea. Japanese iris and oriental poppies come into bloom as Dutch tulips fade. French tarragon grows close by English rosemary and Japanese bunching onion. Honeysuckle from old Tartary partners that from New England, Confederate violets at its feet. In the grove, London plane trees, similar to our sycamore, raise majestic crowns. From their leafy cover, goldfinches, chickadees and wrens make daring raids on unique, turkey-wire feeders, invented by the gardener to protect ground-feeding songbirds from predators and the competition larger birds present.

Soil preparation and enrichment, weed and pest control and regulated irrigation are constants in the gardener's life. The tools of that life -- compost, hose and hoe, pruner, stake and spade -- are symbols of the labor required in every garden plot. Vigorous growth is the reward.

It takes time to absorb the many attractions of a garden on this scale, so settle on a nearby bench hand-painted with ivy, sweetpeas and hydrangeas to compliment the gardener's handiwork. Fooled by artful imitation, a butterfly, one of nature's airborne blossoms, may join you for a moment.

Painted furniture, gardening implements and accessories courtesy of The New Forest, Inc.,
Main Street, Asbury, N.J. 08802
(908) 537-7731

Artist in the meadow:
Rachel Felz
Edison, N.J.
(908) 549-3169
Step across the threshold of this latticed Georgian mansion into a kingdom of art and flowers. From the center hall, behold bounty from the cutting garden in every available container, an elegant living room and jewel-toned dining room, an extensive art collection, the enchanting garden room and wide French doors framing an irresistible landscape.

We have no will to resist, and are drawn onto the terrace overlooking the pool, spacious lawns and a broad palette of ornamental shrubs and plants. There's mystery in this secret garden of ivy-draped trees, leafy corridors, the gleam of pale blossoms from a dusky corner. Paths of gravel, over which clumps of snowdrops and dogtooth violets tumble, wander out of sight to places yet to be explored. The invitation is clear: unknown delights are promised just beyond the limits of our vision.

The landscape has matured into a composition of light and shadow, where 20th century sounds disappear into the thick foliage of the trees and shade-loving species raise flower heads of gentle hue in contrast to the paint-box colors of nearby sunny borders. A collage of green fills curving beds around the trees, softening the lawn's flat plane just as vines blur the angular lines of the house. The gardener's painterly use of tone on tone in differing shapes and textures makes the garden a work of art.

Take your ease and light refreshment on the grounds or on the terrace, where a fine selection of floral art and antique botanicals awaits your attention. The gate on the west side of the house will give you passage to the next secret garden.

Art courtesy of Swain's Galleries, 703 Watchung Avenue, Plainfield, N.J. 07060 (908) 756-1707

Artist in the garden:
Michael McGinley
Plainfield, N.J. (908) 756-1707
"But if you wanted to make a flower garden, what would you plant? Bulbs and sweet smellin' things, but mostly roses."

-- The Secret Garden

A short stroll up Rahway Road to the highest point in Plainfield retraces the path taken by British and Continental troops during the Battle for the Short Hills on June 26, 1777. General Washington, directing operations from the Drake plantation, set his line of defense against the invading forces along the gentle hills to the southeast of his command post. Here the armies met in combat. More than two centuries have passed since that summer day, but a whisper from the past still hovers in the air above this rural landscape.

Early in the 20th century, a stately home arose among the last remaining fragments of earlier estate gardens, and the current residents have considered resurrection of the neglected, sunken rose garden as important as the ongoing restoration of the house. The family's favorite garden colors -- red, pink and apricot -- dance through the rooms in varying intensity, softened with pale green and cooled by touches of blue. The living room's deep berry tones issue a warm welcome to "Four Hills." Color accompanies us as we move through the den to the screened porch, brimming with "sweet smellin' things" from the secret garden. A brick-walled country kitchen affords a view of garden room and greenhouse.

Leaving the house, turn toward a charming, wisteria-draped garage, once home to the estate's three gardeners. Only one gardener holds sway on these grounds today -- the master of the house. Pyramidal evergreens stand guard beside the steps to the secret garden as it flows in graceful tiers to the grassy level far below. Snuggly enclosed by banks of rhododendron and azalea, outlined by close-clipped hedge, geometric patterns are bedded out with perennials and annuals in the manner of an old French parterre. Bright chorus lines of roses waft perfume and petals o'er the garden paths we tread.

Continue your stroll along the hilltop under apple trees and ancient oaks, past the pond and old herb cellar and on to a gazebo overlooking the historic roadway below. The air is fresh beneath the trees, and carries scents from the secret garden.

Potpourri, scented soaps and candles courtesy of Kansas,
100 North Avenue, Plainfield,
N.J. 07060 (908) 753-5775

Artists in the garden:
Maria de Mos
Mark de Mos
Morristown, N.J.
(201) 267-4363
"There are things crowding up out of the earth -- and there are flowers uncurling and buds on everything. There are primroses in the lanes and wood, foxglove and ferns and rock-cress and hedgerow flowers, and the seeds we planted are up."

-- The Secret Garden

A romantic "summer cottage" with rustic shingles and diamond-pane windows was erected in the wooded environment of Sleepy Hollow as Plainfield's heyday as a summer resort drew to a close, and the passing years have not diminished its sylvan charm. Bayberry borders the lawn, while trees in infinite variety -- beech, cryptomeria, holly, dogwood, pear, red oak, franklinia -- continue the woodland theme. Within earshot of the cottage, the children's playhouse restates the home's architectural design in diminutive form. It was brought here from another family property simply because it matched the style and mood of this house in the hollow.

Nestled beside the playhouse is a circular garden, walled and paved with brick. Planted with spring bulbs, roses and early-blooming flowers, it is as fresh, colorful, fragrant and beautiful as a summer bride's bouquet. And, indeed, it is a garden of the heart, the gift of a man and a woman to each other on their silver wedding anniversary.

Let's steal away from the world to follow a pine-needle path through dappled sunlight to the private garden of a very public gardener, chairman of the Plainfield Beautification Committee for the last 25 years. Established a half-century ago upon a formal Italian plan, the garden has now matured into a grove of slender cedars, underplanted with broad-leaf evergreens and flowering trees. Ivy, moss and ferns, primroses, may apple, ginger, violets, sweet woodruff and other native wildings have been encouraged to spread across the woodland floor, returning the garden to the semblance of a forest glade. Here, in blissful solitude, the enchantment of bygone days weaves its spell.

Fresh plants and hanging baskets courtesy of Von Thun's Country Farm Market, Ridge Road (Rt.522), Monmouth Junction 08852 (908) 329-8656

Artist in the garden:
Nancy Brangaccio
Basking Ridge, N.J. (908) 766-2820
There will be painting outside -- and paintings inside -- at the Drake House during the autumn.

You are cordially invited to attend a reception for the artists you have met on our "Secret Gardens" tour on Saturday, October 24, 1992, from 2 - 4 p.m. Their impressions of this summer day will remain on exhibition Sunday, October 25, and every Saturday through November 21, 2 - 4 p.m.