

Sleepy Cat Farm: A gardener's garden blooms in Backcountry Greenwich

Meredith Guinness



An array of gourds hang from the archway trellis as Fred Landman leads a tour of the sprawling 13-acre Sleepy Cat Farm in Greenwich, Conn. Thursday, Sept. 16, 2021. Landman acquired the Georgian Revival house and grounds in 1994 and collaborated with Greenwich architect Charles Hilton and landscape architect Charles J. Stick to create a majestic and magical garden that would come to be known as Sleepy Cat Farm. The property will be the subject of a book "Sleepy Cat Farm: A Gardener's Journey," to be released Oct. 19 by Monacelli Press.

Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

GREENWICH — Upon retiring, many people take up gardening — digging a new perennial border or adding a few bright mums to herald the coming of fall.

Fred Landman has taken the concept to a whole new level, lovingly and methodically creating Sleepy Cat Farm, a 13-acre oasis on Clapboard Ridge Road. More than 25 years in the making, it

represents a close collaboration with landscape architects, designers, artists and skilled workers who tend its lush meadows and groves, pavilions and pools.

Begun as “a garden of which the house could be proud,” the property is now a much-anticipated stop for garden tourists who Landman happily welcomes to promote a love of horticulture, design and the value of plants in our lives.

“Should I just sit here and be a miser with my pot of gold?” said the former president & CEO of PanAmSat, who first moved to the stately brick Georgian home in 1994. “It should be shared.”

Garden enthusiasts far and wide can get a peek inside the enchanting gardens in the new book “Sleepy Cat Farm: A Gardener’s Journey,” due out next month (October 2021, Monacelli, A Phaidon Company).

With text by Caroline Seebohm and lush photography by Curtice Taylor, the nearly 200-page book chronicles the evolution of the property and pays homage to some of the key players in its creation.

One need only look at Landman to be convinced of the restorative nature of gardening. Asked by a visitor to tour the property, he excuses himself briefly.

“Let me just change my shoes. It might be a little wet outside,” he says, returning with a sturdy pair of rubber boots.

From there it’s out to the circular drive, where he points back to the neo-Georgian home built in 1942. While it had great bones and elegant detail, it felt a bit lopsided, he says.

Enter Charles Hilton, a locally based, nationally respected architect known for his grounded, classicist style.

Hilton added a full wing to the home, changing the lines of axis and updating the long-overlooked kitchen, and eventually, the bedrooms and bathrooms.

Meanwhile, Landman was trying his hand at beautifying the front of the home along the driveway. He added a vegetable garden, some flowers, even a neoclassical tool shed.

During breaks, the two men talked about their work and the rest of the property. They realized they had both been eyeing the pool area and its pavilion, which Hilton pronounced “very small and quirky.”

A neighbor offered to sell Landman a quarter-acre of land and Hilton and Landman were off and running, designing and building a stylish pool house with an open pergola and two brick pavilions that would encompass the dining area, changing rooms, kitchen and bathroom they envisioned.

It was the first of many such newer parts that have led to the whole that is Sleepy Cat Farm.

While Landman worked on the initial planting beds, very early on he brought landscape architect Charles Stick into the fold. Based in Charlottesville, Va., Stick shares Landman and Hilton's classicist aesthetic and has been instrumental in turning Landman's visions into realities that work in harmony with the property's natural attributes, Landman said.

"I have done a lot of traveling and when I traveled the world, I saw gardens," he said.

The distinct sections of the garden are a bit like a world tour — from the parterre and putti fountain to the urn-topped grotto and arresting Porta Paradiso to the Chinese pavilion, prayer wheels and raised wooden-plank spirit walk through an iris garden.

The current vegetable garden next to the lower greenhouse fuels and services the imagination of Landman's wife, Seen Lippert, a professional chef who worked with Alice Waters of Chez Panisse fame. Walking through a long arbor strung with long-necked winter squash and the berry wedge protected by a woven willow whip "fedge" (a fence/hedge), he extolled the virtues of her fresh fruit cobbles and rose petal syrup-infused cocktails.

While each garden area represents a specific design — and often another land purchase — the overall plan was to enchant and entice visitors, Landman says.

"This path encircles this area and leads back to the way we came," he says, bending to pull up an errant weed from a patch of ground cover. "If you're curious, you can go off and do other things. You can go off and discover."

The beckoning spirit is evident in the statuary that anchors the landscapes.

Along the path to the Sacred Grove, a bronze figure of Echo stands against massive rocks. A dramatically stretched warrior sculpture by Emile-Antoine Bourdelle guards a reflecting pool, while Adrian Melka's imposing Atlas hefts the world at the end of a gracefully undulating hedge.

While on a trip to Rockport, Me., Landman found an unusual sculpture of a female Bacchus by turn-of-the-century artist Alice Cooper. "Not the rock star," Landman says, with a smile.

The dancing figure blowing two reedy flutes invites visitors down a secret path.

Though Sleepy Cat Farm makes ample use of its acreage, Landman said he's not sure the site is complete. With four gardeners and ongoing inspiration from Hilton, Stick, Lippert and a host of kindred spirits, there may be more to discover.

"I've never said I was done," Landman says as he sat under a gently arched wisteria trellis. "I always say if you have a chance and you can... you should always make something beautiful."

"Sleepy Cat Farm: A Gardener's Journey" will be published in October. Fred Landman and Charles Stick will discuss their work and the book at 1 p.m. Nov. 16, at the New York Botanical Gardens. For more information on this event, visit www.nybg.org.



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