

Opinion **Gardens**

A fount of knowledge: Pennsylvania's Longwood Gardens

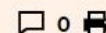
Nearly \$40m a year is available to support the site's commitment to ornamental gardening and education

ROBIN LANE FOX

[+ Add to myFT](#)

Longwood's main fountain garden © Daniel Traub

Robin Lane Fox NOVEMBER 2, 2018



I have just watched the Greek god Zeus being put to shame in America. The tail-end of his Hurricane Michael was sending flashes of sheet lightning through the Pennsylvanian night sky but they were lost in a man-made miracle. The amplified sound of Michael Jackson numbers drowned out his thunder. Jets of water outclassed his rainfall, powered up to 175 feet and lit by multicoloured lights in red, amber, blue and green. Eight spires of water twirled from side to side like dancing ladies in long dresses. In the foreground, 30 flame-jets flared up and down like aquatic water candles. They are all controlled by German-made computers.

With thousands of others, I was watching one of the last seasonal shows in the Main Fountain courtyard of Longwood Gardens, where the fountains were reopened last May. After a \$90m programme of renovation and remodelling, they are the finest in the world. Five miles of new piping now support 1,719 water-jets whose water is recycled between wells and underground tanks. “It is like strolling through Rome by night,” Paul Redman, director of the gardens since 2006, told me. Nero would love it, but he might prefer a night when Handel and Mozart, rather than Jackson, are the musical backing. More precisely, it is “Rome crossed with the Tuileries”, Redman added. The central court has been designed with a hard surfacing of powdered granite in which 168 upright lime trees, *Tilia cordata* Greenspire, have replaced the former Norway maples. Flowers are restrained, but there are nearly 3,000 clipped bushes of *Buxus japonica* Green Beauty, vetted for any hint of box disease before being planted from nursery-beds where they had been kept in vigilant quarantine.

Longwood Gardens is run with the help of a now-huge endowment from their founding genius, Pierre Dupont. Born in 1870, he was a mastermind behind the growth of the Dupont company which had begun as a maker of gunpowder in the 1790s. In 1898 he already owned a floristry business with seven greenhouses. In July 1906, he bought the Longwood estate near Delaware, now over 1,000 acres, writing that he had just “experienced what I would formerly have diagnosed as an attack of insanity”. Like everything else he touched, he turned Longwood into a wonder, a technical and horticultural marvel, before his death in 1954.

Nearly \$40m a year is available to support Longwood's commitment to ornamental gardening and education, but more than 60 per cent of it now comes from the gate. Some 1.5m visitors enter each year, nearly twice as many as in 2008. The [website](#) registers 320,000 hits a day. Outdoors, the famous long double borders and the display beds are now balanced by another 90 acres of meadow, discreetly gardened beyond the main perimeter in a "natural" style. Back in the trial beds I marvelled at tall clumps of Canna Toucan Yellow, far happier than any of my cannas in dry England. The later stages of Dahlia Festival 2018 were still beguiling and apart from the superb blocks of yellow and red flowers in the long borders, I was delighted by a tall blue aster with daisy flowers, *Aster tataricus* at about six feet. Longwood always throws up ideas for English visitors' gardens.

After Hurricane Jackson had subsided over the amplifiers, I walked back by night-lights through the water lily courtyard, an enchanting experience. The varieties in the black-water pools are artfully arranged and grown, showing parents of the big Victoria water lilies as well as the children in the centre. Night-blooming varieties are grouped at the edges of each pool. I then went indoors to Longwood's crowning glory, its conservatories, 110,000 square feet of them under glass.

They centre on the massive orangery-like building which Dupont himself inaugurated in 1920. Inside are the big rooms which contemporaries described as "floral sun parlours". The central sections still contain the expanses of mown grass which Dupont liked to see within edgings of greenhouse flowers. They are not easy to maintain but they give a restful feel which other conservatories lack. This weekend, the main display is the chrysanthemum festival, hitting its best after unseasonal weather delayed the flowers by more than a fortnight. While Britain has been complaining of drought, Longwood has been coping with a summer of dull and wet weather.

“

Five miles of new piping support 1,719 water-jets whose water is recycled between wells

Jim Sutton, mastermind of the indoor flower displays, showed me some of the differences in style and training.

Gardeners from Longwood went to Japan to learn the arts of shaping from the older Japanese masters whose skills are at risk of dying out. If they ever do, they will

survive in Pennsylvania. Longwood's trained gardeners display chrysanthemums shaped as spiral standards or as long trailing cascades. Others are pruned like flat-pointed shields. Buds are strictly limited, especially on the rows of single-stemmed large-flowered beauties that edge the pathways. One master-plant was about to be towed into position, grown to be 12ft wide, 10ft tall and have more than 1,000 flowers at once after only 18 months of cultivation.

From November 22 until January 6, the chrysanthemums give way to the star indoor display of the year, the Christmas spectacular. Tickets are all timed and have to be pre-booked as 400,000 visitors will be coming through. The traditional winners will be there, the beautifully coloured poinsettias, including Santa Claus Red and pinks of a subtlety we never see at an English Christmas, the red-stemmed Cornus Baton Rouge and the superb blue-flowered *Plectranthus thyrsoides*. They are laid like big tapestry carpets in breathtakingly beautiful patterns. White hellebores and white mini-cyclamen will be fastened along railings. The theme of the year will be Reimagining The Christmas Tree with cleverly hung plants helping us to do so on the trees' branches. As usual, there will be singalongs in the hall to music from the Aeolian organ of 10,000 pipes which Dupont commissioned in 1930.

Longwood's style is admirably un-English but it owes a debt to several English gardeners. Dupont's first head gardener, William Mullins, was English. Recently, the designer Kim Wilkie was hired to integrate a big block of public lavatories into a crucial site beside one end of the conservatories. He introduced a semi-circle of well-proportioned grass steps and inside the buildings, green walls with hanging green creepers to frame the most ecological indoor loos in America. Further over, Tom Stuart-Smith has designed an enclosed circular peony garden. Only this year the [former head gardener of London's Inner Temple, Andrea Brunsendorf](#), has come in as head of outdoor horticulture.

Dupont himself looked carefully at Europe. In 1910, he visited the fountain garden at the Villa D'Este in Italy and in 1913 returned and also visited the Villa Gamberaia near Florence. In 1925 he visited Monet in his garden at Giverny. He found ideas but took them in original directions, usually with a love of technical engineering. After his death the garden's first director, Russell Seibert, stated that "in this age of mechanical, chemical, electronic and atomic miracles . . . feeling of closeness to Nature through gardening shall be one of the potent stabilisers of our civilisation". Dupont's love of display-gardening supports that truth, with an American twist of colour, scale and skill.

*Follow [@FTProperty](#) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first.
Subscribe to [FT Life](#) on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos*