

Self-Guided Tour



Cottage-in-the-Meadow Gardens

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Welcome to Cottage-in-the Meadow Gardens! The starting point for your self-guided tour is the main entrance to the gardens at the end of the front driveway, just off the street. Let's take a look, first, at the architecture of the main residence. The trellising on the west and south walls supported grape vines during the communal era. The vines had two purposes. As you might expect, one was to produce grapes for eating, wine-making, pies, and jelly. The second was to keep the house cooler during Iowa's hot summers. All plantings around residences had to be utilitarian, hence the trellised grapes to the exclusion of other vines. Trees grown in yards could only be fruit or nut trees. Any other varieties were considered frivolous.



The house was built in 1900, the last "old" Amana house in South Amana (see date at peak of west wall). Brick construction was used almost exclusively in this village because South Amana was one of several Amana villages

that had a brickyard. Exterior walls are double, that is, there are two parallel walls of brick with an air space in between, providing very effective insulation. Larry's wife, Wilma, was born in this house, and it is still in the family after four generations.



The property was also the site of the first structure in South Amana, a log cabin bought from a settler. The cabin, located on the bluffs above the village, was hauled on skids to its new site and housed the Amana workers who constructed the village's first buildings. The cabin's fate is unknown, but was probably dismantled before the present residence was built.



As you move closer to the house, note, on your left, the unusual leaves of the plant that fills the bed between the driveway and the house's foundation. This is Painter's Palette (*Persicaria filiformis*), a tough and hardy plant that is showy but needs little care other than an occasional drink when the ground is really dry.

Now turn to your right and take a look at the garden beds to the right of the driveway. The oval bed (above) bordered by large stones contains a weeping mulberry tree. Fortunately, it does not produce berries. If you are familiar with the purple mulberry fruit, you know that it can be quite messy, especially if it has passed through the digestive tract of birds!



The structure closest to the street is a lath house. Sweet Autumn Clematis vines (*Clematis ternifolia*) adorn the lath house. In fall, they produce clouds of fragrant, white blossoms. Its unusual trapezoidal shape was dictated in part by a triangular flower bed (not shown), which the Rettigs didn't want to disturb because of its historical significance. Lined with rocks, the triangle bed was laid out by Carrie Shoup, Wilma's mother, in the 1940s. The rocks were

gathered by Carrie on vacation trips with her family.



In this general area you will also find potted cannas, part of a larger canna collection that graces the gardens. The bushes on either side of the lath house entrance are 'Limelight' hydrangeas (*Hydrangea paniculata*), a new variety from the Netherlands. The hydrangea bushes against the fence are the old-fashioned 'Snowball' (*Hydrangea arborescens*) and were planted in the early 1940s.



Continuing in counterclockwise fashion, we turn next to the area that has a small trellis with vines on it. Note the very dark-leaved plant at the south end of the trellis. This is Canna 'Australia,' a rather rare plant. It is distinguished by the fact that among dark-leaved cannas it is the only one that retains its coloration the



whole season. Other varieties turn greenish during the summer. At the opposite end of the trellis is another canna. This one is called the 'Banana Canna' (*Canna musifolia*) because its large leaves resemble those of a banana plant.



This particular plant has an interesting history. In 1998 the gardens were hit by an unheard-of weather event that had meteorologists puzzled. Unfortunately, the residents of South Amana, their houses, and their



gardens were subjected to a storm that brought sustained winds estimated at 150 miles per hour and that lasted at least 15 minutes. Larry and Wilma lost 13 trees in their gardens and went, in an instant, from shade gardeners to sun gardeners. Debris around their two-story house was piled so high that the house was not visible from any direction! In the aftermath of the storm, landscapers filled in a hole in the front yard left by the stump of a large, old maple tree that was a victim of the storm. As the grass seed began to germinate in the new soil, Larry noticed a sprout that definitely was not grass. Curious, he potted it up and was amazed at what resulted. It was the very Banana Canna (shown above) to your left! Evidently, someone had grown this canna in the soil that the landscapers had brought in. The canna must have produced seeds, one of which actually sprouted in the front yard! Cannas are tropical plants, so it is amazing that the seeds had, in all likelihood, survived an Iowa winter!



The Rettigs regularly burn plant refuse in their vegetable garden at the end of the season, including canna stalks killed by the frost. There are now Banana Cannas coming up in their vegetable garden every spring, evidently from the seeds that have escaped the flames.

Next we turn our attention to the area under the front porch. Note the fern in one of the hanging baskets. Its name is 'Fluffy Ruffles,' a rare fern that is about 25 years old. Difficult to reproduce, it is a sport of the common Boston Fern.

As you turn around and face south, you will discover what is behind the trellis with the vines you saw earlier. This area used to be the Rettig's front patio, but, as you can see, it has been taken over completely by potted plants. Here you will find additional canna varieties in a growing collection as well as lots of coleus plants. Note that very few of these plants bloom. The challenge here was to create lots of color and interest using only leaves. Larry potted the two Japanese Maples (center and right in the photo), instead of planting them in the ground, for two reasons: He is assured that they will not suffer any winter damage, and he can move them around to different locations at will. Most of the plants you see in this area will either winter in an unheated room in the residence basement (where they remain dormant until spring) or under grow lights in the tropical garden on the second floor.



As you pass through the patio area, take a peek through the door on your left. This was the wash house under the old Amana communal system. Larry converted it into a potting shed/greenhouse.



He still uses the cistern under the raised area just outside the potting shed door (see partially hidden downspout in bottom right photo). It collects the rain water from the roofs of both the main residence and the building outside which you are standing. The water is piped into two areas: the basement of the residence, where it is used to water indoor plants and also to the potting shed, where it is



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used to water not only the plants inside the shed, but also most of the plants in pots in all areas of the gardens. At last count, Larry was tending over 200 potted plants!

Sitting on top of the cistern are numerous potted tropicals, including Glory Bower Vine (*Clerodendrum thompsonae*), whose deep scarlet blossoms are surrounded by a contrasting white husk (see photo above right). Here you will also find a number of different alocasias, including 'Elephant Ear,' 'Frydek,' and 'Hilo Beauty.'



Before you follow the sidewalk as it makes a 90 degree turn to the left, note the fern in the low pot just behind the open book that has an inscription on each page. A very unusual fern (*Atherium felix-femina*), the leaflets on its fronds cross to form an "X."



As you round the corner of the potting shed and step out into the open, turn in the direction you just came from and take a look at the vine climbing up the Arborvitae evergreen tree. This is a kiwi vine. The fruit is smaller than the kiwis you buy in the store, is not fuzzy—you can eat it like a plum or a grape—and has a sweeter taste than the commercial varieties. It is green in color and develops a purplish tint when ripe.



Now turn toward the walkway that divides the property approximately in half. The small cottage with fenced in yard on the other side of the walkway was the daycare center for children under the old communal system and was constructed in 1869. Larry and Wilma restored it some years ago and use it now for storage of garden-related items. They also restored the fence in recent years.



Continue toward the cottage and walk under the porch. Step to your right into the fenced garden and note the tall ornamental grass in the center. This is Ravenna Grass (*Saccharum ravennae*), the tallest ornamental grass (up to 15 feet) that can be grown in the Rettig's zone 5 garden. In the southwest corner of this garden, you will find a small, sunken water feature. The container is an old wash kettle that was removed from a neighbor's residence during a remodeling project. It contains a water lily and dwarf cattails, as well as several frogs, including *Rana metalica*. The bench in the southeast corner was built by Larry's father about a decade ago. You can see it in the photo section following this tour).



Leaving this garden, you will return to the cottage porch, turn to your right, and continue out into the grassy area to the east of the cottage. Larry and Wilma jokingly call this their "meadow," hence the garden name, Cottage-in-the-Meadow Gardens.



Notice that it even has a sheep! To your right (see photo above) is a long hedgerow of 'Snowball' Hydrangeas (*Hydrangea arborescens*). This hedge was created from the original planting that you saw earlier in the front yard of the main residence.



In the southeast corner of the meadow is a trellised screen house that Larry designed and his father helped build in 1990. Wilma and Larry relax in the inviting hammock chairs inside when



they take a break from their garden labors. They also eat their evening meals at a picnic table in the screen house, weather permitting, and enjoy the beautiful view into the river valley from this vantage point. You are welcome to go inside and take a look. Please step carefully as you enter and exit.



As you look into the farm field beyond the pillar-and-trellis rose garden, you will see the South Amana Cemetery off in the distance, slightly to your right. Note that the headstones are small, white, and identical. As in olden days, there are no family plots. Residents are buried in order of death.



A few steps further to the north is the Rettig's 100-year-old vegetable garden. Larry and Wilma garden organically and no-till. When they sow seeds, they simply lay out a row of compost and sow directly into it. The easternmost part of the garden (nearest the barbed-wire fence) contains the Rettigs' seed bank. Here they have rescued vegetable varieties that were brought from Germany by the Amana people and raised in their communal kitchen gardens. Wilma and Larry are both native Amana folks, but they left here when they went to college, never thinking that they would return. Upon their return in 1977, they soon

discovered that these wonderful old vegetable varieties were grown only in elderly ladies' home gardens and would disappear forever, once the ladies were gone. If you are interested in seeing a brochure describing the varieties grown or would like some seed, please click on the appropriate link at the end of the tour.



As you leave the vegetable garden, head west toward the public walkway. Here, a small orchard contains some unusual varieties. The small tree nearest the vegetable garden is a Mirabella Plum. This variety was



brought from Germany by the Amana settlers. It is a small, sweet, yellow, freestone plum that is virtually unknown in the U.S. It must be propagated by grafting, since it does not come true to seed. There are only a handful of these trees left in the Amanas. The next tree west is a sweet cherry,



then comes an apricot, then a Bartlett Pear, and last in the row is a Shipova. This unusual fruit is a cross between a mountain ash and a pear. The fruit is small, somewhat squat, russeted, has a slight red blush, and is quite sweet. This is one of only a handful of Shipova trees in the U.S. Directly north of the Shipova is a Stanley Plum, the same plum that is dried to make prunes.



The small apple tree on the right just beneath the old 'Jonadell' apple tree is very special. Jeffrey Meyer, a young Amana man, established a large horticultural business in Jacksonville, Florida. However, his first love is antique fruit varieties. On one of his fruit-scouting trips to Ohio, he came upon a family with a very old apple tree, who claimed that it was planted by Johnathan Chapman, more popularly known as Johnny Appleseed. Mr. Meyer took some cuttings from the ancient tree and propagated them via tissue culture at his business. He was kind enough to share one with Larry. It even came with an official certificate of authentication!



As you pass through the arbor and step back onto the walkway, turn to your right briefly and note the spruce tree with a face on it. This is Bruce the Spruce. He has a tenant who is somewhat shy, so look closely under the foliage at the base of the tree. Do you see the gnome home? (Gnomes are notoriously reticent, so do not expect him to greet you!) Turn back up the walkway. Proceed south for a short distance and turn right onto the sidewalk leading to the back entrance to the residence. Note the barrel fountain on the patio to your left and the herb garden



in front of you. The kitchen is right inside the entrance, so Wilma can come out and, with only a few steps, snip herbs as she cooks. Note also the bed of ivy to the left of the kitchen entrance.





Larry rooted a sprig from Wilma's wedding bouquet and Wilma's mother planted it in this bed in 1962.



As you continue on to your right to the northeast corner of the residence, you will see an old, very tall rosebush. This variety is 'Harrison's Yellow' and has been growing in this spot since the early 1900s. In the niche with the column and the urn, note the low-growing, lacy-leaved plant with small yellow flowers. This is *Corydalis leutea*, one of a number of plants brought to this country recently by plant explorers. Larry is in contact with several of these explorers and acquires some of their finds to try out in his garden. He recommends this plant highly, as it grows happily in almost all garden situations. Look for it to appear in local garden centers soon.



Continue on the cobblestone path to the north side of the residence. This area is home to a collection of hostas and ferns that date to the early 1900s. The apple and pear trees planted here echo the utilitarian bent of the old communal leaders. Note the two oak chairs. They were built by Larry's father a decade or so ago.



As you come to the end of the cobblestone pathway, you will find yourself on a small lawn on the street-side of the residence. The



tree with the open habit and peeling bark is a Chinese Seven-Son-Flower Tree (*Heptacodium miconiodes*). This is a tree that does just about everything a gardener could want. Aside from its peeling bark, it blooms in late summer, when no other trees are in bloom. The blossoms are white, double, and fragrant. True to the tree's name, the blossoms appear in clusters of seven. Once the petals are gone, the sepals (small structures which hold the petals in place) enlarge and turn pink. Then the tree blooms pink



for several weeks. As if that were not enough, the leaves turn red before they fall. Monarch butterflies flock to the tree in droves when it is in bloom.



The “Scallop Garden” in this area was laid out by Wilma’s mother in the 1940s, again bordered with rocks she had collected on vacations. Partially hidden behind a clump of ornamental grass in the center scallop is a small fish pond installed by Wilma’s father in the early 1930s. Water circulates through a fountain inside the white arbor and back into the pond. The red salvias in the two outer scallops are in memory of Wilma’s mother, who grew them here each year.



Follow the short flagstone path tucked between the hostas and the salvias, and you will be back up on the driveway where you started.

Wilma and Larry hope that you have enjoyed your self-guided tour. Again, if you have any questions or comments or would like to order some seeds from the seed bank, please [click here](#).

Auf Wiedersehen! Come visit us again at a different season of the year. Gardens—and ours are no exception—are always a work in progress.

