

The Illusion of Pan's Garden

By C.G. Wolfe © The Black River Journal / Photo by Susan Pedersen

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In 1908, Robert Tubbs, an officer of the Corn Exchange Bank in New York, and his brother Henry, an editor at Scribner's, turned their backs on the big city and began searching the hills of northwest New Jersey for the country life they had known as boys growing up in Kingston, Pennsylvania. With their modest savings, they began their quest, neither brother exactly sure of what they were looking for, until one snowy day when they followed a friend to an 18th century farmhouse in Chester Township, that she said, "takes you by the hand." Here among the willows, buried beneath the brambles and the impenetrable blackberry patches, the Tubb's brothers, who were both gardening enthusiasts with a deep interest in horticulture, found the muse that led them to create Willowood Arboretum, New Jersey's most comprehensive and longest continually operating Arboretum.



More than a century later, Willowood Arboretum, now part of the Morris County Park system, is still a place that takes visitors by the hand and leads them down quiet pathways to provocative scenes of calculated beauty such as "Pan's Garden." Inspired by the design of a Persian prayer rug, Willowood describes Pan's Garden as a "living tapestry," where rectangular beds of plants are "woven together." The formal garden was created by Henry Tubbs and was his canvas for an illusion of perspective or what he called his "ruse" of design. Using what appears to be parallel borders of Lambs Ear as edging, the path between the garden beds actually narrows at its far end and the plants diminish in size. The effect is an optical illusion that makes the path seem much longer. Framed by conical boxwoods, the bronze bust of "Pan," who is obviously in on the joke and smiles mockingly, seems much farther away than he actually is. It's a ruse that Henry was particularly fond of and used throughout the arboretum.

Pan - Styled as "the god of rural scenery" by 17th century poet John Milton, the pastoral Greek god Pan, was half goat and half man, with horns sprouting from the top of his head. Often accompanied by wood nymphs and other forest deities, Pan was the patron of Arcadia, and ruled over shepherds, hunters, and rustic music (he is credited in mythology with inventing the pan flute). A partier by nature, pan needed to catch a wink or two when he could, but if he was disturbed from his naps, Pan was known to let out a blood-curdling scream that inspired dread in mortals and caused them to flee in fear – hence the word Panic.

Willowood Arboretum is located at 300 Longview Road, Chester Township, NJ. Learn more at willowood.org and morrisparks.net