



# MAD

*agical*



## Garden marks silver anniversary

**A** quarter-century after opening its grounds to the public, the Madoo Conservancy in Sagaponack remains a gardener's paradox.

The 2-acre Sagaponack garden entices visitors with its elaborate and intricate plantings, the inspired vision of late artist Robert Dash, without sacrificing its intimacy.

Though new and oftentimes exotic species are introduced annually, the garden still remains true to its East End roots, those carefully planted and cultivated by Mr. Dash starting shortly after he stumbled upon the former swath of tractor turnaround land in the 1960s.

And even though it became a public garden in 1994, had been visited by friends of Mr. Dash and fellow gardening enthusiasts for two decades prior to that, and has been featured in prominent publications, both nationally and abroad, over the years, the Madoo Conservancy inexplicably remains one of the South Fork's best-kept secrets.

"It is both horticulturally important in that there are really a lot of different plant materials here, a lot of it is relatively rare even ... and there is also a very strong sense of design," said Alejandro Saralegui, director of the Madoo Conservancy, who is coordinating the year long celebration marking Madoo's opening to the public.

"You normally don't get those two things together," he continued. "It's typically either more about the plans, or a good design, but not about the plants. Here at Madoo, Bob Dash created a garden where the two come together."

Those who knew Mr. Dash the best prior to his 2013 death—he passed at his home, nestled in the Sagaponack garden, at age 82—described him as a man of contradictions. It was an endearing and, for those unfamiliar with his unique style, potentially distancing characteristic that is forever encapsulated in his always evolving, yet simultaneously grounded gardening masterpiece.

To mark the 25th anniversary of Madoo, which means "my dove" in Old Scottish, Mr. Saralegui enlisted the help of Perry Guillot, a landscape architect from Southampton who lived in a house on the garden's grounds for seven summers between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Titled "Madoo: A History in Photographs, Celebrating 25 Years as a Public Garden," the exhibition opening to the public on May 11 will feature an assortment of Madoo-inspired photographs, artworks, poems, and clippings of published articles focusing on the garden. Those attending the special THAWFest preview in late March at Madoo were the first to take in the display.

The centerpieces of the exhibition, on view in Mr. Dash's old studio through July 13, are seven paintings that were directly inspired by Madoo. One of

By  
frank s.  
**COSTANZA**



Madoo in bloom in 2011. Inset, a painting by Robert Dash.



Madoo in the spring. Inset, Alejandro Saralegui, director of the Madoo Conservancy. Illustrations, below left, “Smooth Aster, 1” and “Untitled” by Bob Dash.

them, titled “Fire Screen,” is a double-sided work painted on an actual fire screen from Mr. Dash’s home, underscoring the undeniable and permanent connection between it and the surrounding grounds.

“I think that, first and foremost, it is an amazing setting as it is in his actual studio,” Mr. Guillot said about the exhibition, which will also feature between 30 and 40 old photographs of the garden taken by Mr. Dash or one of his many friends and visitors over the years. “These items will be on display in the area, in the very room, where Bob Dash painted for 50 years.”

Noting that he was hired by Mr. Dash to design a blueprint for the garden’s grounds in the late 1980s, Mr. Guillot examined an estimated 200 items, a mix of photographs, articles, poems and paintings, before finalizing the exhibit. The photographs on display were taken over five decades, beginning in the 1970s, by Mr. Dash and others, including German-born Hans Namuth, who photographed many local artists, including Jackson Pollock. According to a release by Madoo, the exhibition is intended to present the notion of

Madoo as Gesamtkunstwerk, or “one complete artwork that brings together Dash’s life’s work in painting, gardening and poetry—as well as his inner circle of artist and writer friends.”

The 5-foot-long horticultural illustration created in 1988 by Mr. Guillot, at Mr. Dash’s request, is part of the exhibition as well, offering a bird’s-eye view of Madoo at that time. Mr. Guillot estimates that about 80 percent of the original gardens from then can still be found

today, though many of the original trees—such as Madoo’s famous Gingko Grove—are 35 to 40 years older, providing much more shade to visitors.

Mr. Guillot estimates that roughly 20 percent of the garden’s grounds features new and colorful plantings, underscoring the constant flux that occurs at Madoo and, in turn, continues to attract those who have walked the grounds many times before.

“Trees have come and gone,” Mr. Guillot said. “I knew the day I picked the pencil off the paper that it was an obsolete drawing,” he added, referring to his horticultural blueprint. “Bob continued to experiment with different plantings.”





Greenery at Madoo in 2011. Right, “Dwarf Pear Flowering” by Robert Dash. Inset, Mr. Dash and his dog, Barnsley, in 2011.

Still, many of Madoo’s fixtures, such as its vegetable garden and rose beds—the latter of which is where Mr. Dash’s remains were scattered as per his final wishes—are constants.

Leslie Close, an avid gardener from Bridgehampton and a longtime friend of Mr. Dash, said that though he is well-known for his artistic endeavors—Mr. Dash’s paintings have been displayed in major galleries in both Europe and the United States—his creativity and innovation were perpetually on display at Madoo.

“He was an artist. He had the eye of an artist,” said Ms. Close, who serves on the board of The Madoo Conservancy and who used to work at Wave Hill, a 28-acre estate in the Bronx that was often visited by Mr. Dash. “He used plants as an artist would use any materials.”

And Mr. Dash was never one to limit the colors on his gardening palette. For example,

a rare white, summer-flowering *Franklinia* tree first discovered by botanist William Bartram in what is now Georgia in the late 1700s is considered one of Madoo’s most unique attractions. As the story goes, Mr. Bartram returned to the same location about 10 years later, looking to gather additional samples of the tree—later named after Benjamin Franklin—only to learn that it was no longer there.

“It has never been found in the wild again,” Mr. Saralegui said. “Because of that, all *Franklinia* trees in the world are genetically identical.”

As interesting as they are, the garden’s permanent plantings were never intended to stand on their own, and that’s because Mr. Dash always envisioned Madoo as a forever changing extension of himself.

“Change is a big aspect of Madoo,” Mr. Saralegui agreed. “Bob used to say that the garden shouldn’t be preserved in amber. There are new

projects going on all the time.”

For example, this year’s flower gardens will boast an assortment of silver-hued plantings to help commemorate Madoo’s 25th anniversary as a public treasure. A mix of silver *eryngiums*, known as the “silver ghost” due to their shiny silvery leaves, *Salvia argentea*, commonly called “silver sage,” *Digitalis snow thimble*, also known as “white foxglove,” among others, will greet visitors this spring and summer, according to Mr. Saralegui.

“There’s a lot of silver in our future,” he said, adding that the garden will also boast an assortment of pale lavenders and pale blues.

Mr. Saralegui said Mr. Dash would have wholeheartedly endorsed the silver garden concept, explaining that the late artist once installed a bunch of yellow and gold plantings to honor his friend Elaine Benson, a “bottle blonde” who used to work at Madoo.

Both Mr. Guillot and Ms. Close agreed with

that take, with the former adding that Mr. Dash would be thrilled to know that his beloved Madoo was still being appreciated by visitors.

Though she has been gardening for 45 years, and her garden is about the same size as Madoo, Ms. Close said she’s continually amazed by how her longtime friend managed to offer so many different experiences without sacrificing intimacy.

“It’s amazing ... and not an easy thing to achieve,” she said. “He created these intimate, special places that sort of unravel as you walk through it. You never perceive the whole garden at once, and each space has its own character. It’s really a wonderful series of incidents and small gardens that meander along.

“It said just so much about him,” Ms. Close continued, referring to Mr. Dash. “The best thing [Mr. Saralegui] has done is to keep that unusual and quirky spirit alive.”