

GET GROWING

S.I. Garden Club is still caring for Alice's garden

Members of the club she founded in 1914, tend to the planting at the Alice Austen house in Rosebank

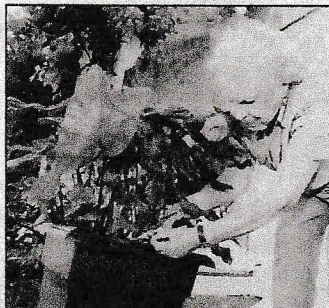
By ANNIE LEE WIGHTMAN

Members of Staten Island Garden Club have been maintaining plants at the Alice Austen House in Rosebank for about 30 years.

It was Alice herself who founded the club in 1914 — the first garden club on Staten Island, and, apparently, the second club in the Federated Garden Clubs of New York State.

Alice, who inherited the seaside cottage from her grandparents and lived their most of her life, is famous for her photographs documenting everyday Victorian life on Staten Island and Manhattan.

She was born Elizabeth Alice Munn to Alice Cornell Austen and Edward Stepford Munn at "Woodbine Cottage" just a few blocks from "Clear Comfort," the home of her maternal grandparents. When young Elizabeth's father disappeared, her mother went back to using her maiden name and moved into Clear Comfort, where, in addition to her grandparents, Alice lived with aunts, uncles and several servants.



Annie Lee Wightman, board member of the Staten Island Garden Club, trims leaves from a Caladium on the grounds of the Alice Austen House.

HER FIRST CAMERA

The Danish sea captain who married her mother's sister, Mary, introduced 10-year-old Alice to photography, bringing home a newly invented and unwieldy camera from his travels and teaching her how to use it. One can find many photos of the garden at Clear Comfort in Alice's prolific output. It has been said that everyone in her family was a gardener of some skill.

Some of her photographs show her grandfather in various poses in 1891, including him trimming the Dutchmen's Pipe vines growing on the posts and roof of the front porch of Clear Comfort facing the bay.

There is mention in the book, "Alice's World," by Ann Novotny, of a mulberry tree in the yard; and it is known from photographs that a lush wisteria vine (is there any other kind?) cov-



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE FILE PHOTO

Island landscape architect Bradford Green, in his representative restoration of the grounds at Clear Comfort, used five different vines on each post of the porch to achieve the lushness seen in old photographs.

ered the walls and part of the roof of the kitchen at the back of the house. A free-standing wisteria still grows behind the parlor and requires constant pruning by this writer.

LANDMARKED COTTAGE

The City acquired Clear Comfort in 1975 and the gardens of the landmarked cottage were restored and reopened to the public in 1985.

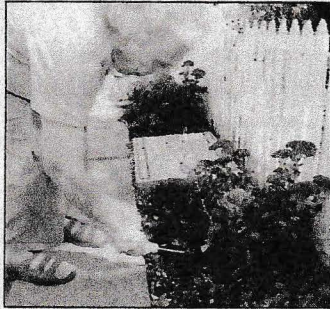
Island landscape architect Bradford Green, in his representative restoration of the grounds at Clear Comfort, used five different vines, including Dutchman's Pipe, on each post of the porch to achieve the lushness seen in old photographs. Presently, only one or two of the hardiest of these vines remains on the posts.

Alice left "Clear Comfort" in the late 1940s to live in St. George and died a pauper at the Farm Colony in Sea View in 1952. After she left the Rosebank cottage, gardening on the grounds was erratic and sporadic.

When I first began to attend the grounds, there were vestiges of an herb garden planted by one of the caretakers, which included vicious burdock, among other herbs.

TODAY'S GARDEN

The present plantings of flowers at the Alice Austen House are representative of what Alice might have planted herself, and include both perennials and annuals. Among these are sunflowers of various types, verbena bonariensis, zinnias, ele-



S.I. ADVANCE PHOTOS/FRANK J. JOHNS

Mrs. Wightman, tends to a Sedum Autumn in the garden at Alice Austen's beloved Clear Comfort.

phants' ears, astilbe, hibiscus, lilacs, cleome, hosta, marigolds, hydrangea, Polish amaranth, tithonia, rudbeckia, and joe pye weed — to name just a few!

Aside from rose bushes and the few plants previously mentioned, it has proved impossible to determine what plants definitely were grown at the site, either before or after Alice herself became the owner.

Even though there are pictures of some plants, like rose bushes, the actual sites are not established. The best we can do is to include modern hybrids of plants likely to have been planted there by Alice or a gardener in her employ.

Flower sites were chosen that would be the most amenable to plants chosen and least disturbing to Parks Department employees attending the grounds.

Staten Island Garden Club

also is partially dependent on what the Parks Department currently is growing at Silver Lake greenhouse. Club members who volunteer at the house also start cuttings from their own plants or divide plants from their own gardens.

Staten Island Garden Club also maintains the tiny strip of garden plants underneath the picket fence and the gate at the south side of Alice Austen House at the end of Hylan Boulevard.

Annie Lee Wightman is past president and current board member of the Staten Island Garden Club which is a member of First District Federated Garden Clubs of New York State.