

Guided tour of Ringling Garden's Secret Garden by Olivia Haynes, Sarasota Garden Club Historian.

February 12 2025



I am so happy to talk to you today about Mable Ringling and her Secret Garden. According to Ron McCarty, former keeper of C'ad Zan, people always talk about John Ringling and his impact on the development of Sarasota, but Mable actually had a huge impact on Sarasota in her own right.

Our Sarasota Garden Club (SGC) will be 98 years old on May 6 (2025), and Mable was not only one of our founding members, she was also the first President of the Founders Circle.

Unfortunately, Mable died in 1929, at the age of 54, from Adisons disease. For me, being sworn in as President in 2014, it was very humbling because I knew I was following in her very large footprints.

We have many reasons to be proud of SGC. One reason is, it was founded by the most recognizable names in Sarasota. Among them were Ida Ringling North, Mrs Charles Ringling, Owen Burns, Marie Selby, and Ellen Caples, just to name a few. All of these people left

their stamp on Sarasota, from when it was a young community, until the present.

Mable left us many legacies. One of them was her Rose Garden. This garden had been, until hurricanes Helene and Milton, the oldest continuously grown rose garden in Florida, and one of the oldest public rose gardens in the south. It was considered to be an outstanding example of a 20th century garden in America. The Rose Garden actually pre-dated the building of C'ad Zan, which means House of John in Venetian dialect.

Another part of Mable's legacy is Mable's Secret Garden, a project near and dear to my heart. This garden had totally disappeared when turf grew to cover the gardens and its pathways. It was completely lost and forgotten. The garden was rediscovered in 1978 by Merle Sauve, who was a Ringling docent and a member of Driftwood Circle of Sarasota Garden Club. She knew a jardinière like this one would not be located in a field of grass. She kept walking around it and started noticing bits of the tabby concrete paths peeking through the grass.

Judy Schneider, a very active member of Driftwood Circle, and a former President, had a son who was looking for an Eagle Scout project. The Boy Scouts got permission to dig out the turf, which when done, revealed the four large squares around the jardinière, the 8 rectangle

gardens surrounding them, and the 4 corner square gardens. Driftwood Circle paid for the planting of the garden. At that time, only Ringling staff were able to work on the grounds. They raised the money for the project by having a fundraiser, displaying Christmas trees from many countries and inviting the public. It was called "The Holiday Heritage Tree Festival".

I have read that Mable put rose petals in water in the jardinière and had it opened when she worked in the garden, so that her garden had a beautiful scent.

I'd like to say something off topic, about Judy Schneider. She was a past President, she really loved our club, and she was passionate about scholarships for deserving students. She passed away about 4 years ago, and she left our club a large endowment for our scholarship program. In 2014, when I was President, we gave out \$6,000 in scholarships. Thanks to Judy, this year, we will be giving out \$60,000 in scholarships to deserving students. We all owe her a debt of thanks.

I arrived in Sarasota in 2000 and as a Ringling volunteer, I was upset to see the Secret Garden had fallen in to disrepair. I felt its condition was disrespectful to Mable's memory. I went to Driftwood Circle and asked what could we do to fix this issue? I learned about the rediscovery of the garden in 1978 and, that Driftwood Circle was contributing \$250 a year toward the upkeep of the Secret Garden. They suggested I talk to John Wetanhall, the Executive Director of the Museum, to find out why nothing was being done for the garden. He explained that the budget was very limited and we were the only ones donating to the Secret Garden and \$250 would not pay for the labor cost. I told him I had a deal for him! I said there were many people in the club who would volunteer, as a labor of love for Mable. Two days later, I received a call from Ron Mallory, Ringling's horticulturist. We met that week and very soon the Ringling's ground staff amended the soil and repaired the irrigation system. Within a couple of weeks, the garden was ready to plant. Driftwood Circle again, paid for the plants and now provided the labor, as well. I have organized and notified the Garden Gang since 2003, except for during the Covid pandemic time. The Secret Garden Gang works every other week on Tuesdays.

While Mable entertained in her Italianate columned Rose Garden, the Secret Garden was her own private sanctuary. She actually called it her "onesie twosie" garden. Even though the garden structure looks formal, she planted it in a cottage style with the plants and cuttings brought to her by people who visited Ca'd Zan and who understood her passion for gardening. Since Mable is buried right behind the Secret Garden, along with John and his sister Ida, we take this responsibility very seriously and we feel that when the garden looks good, Mable smiles down on us.

As a result of this project, the Garden Club has received many major awards. We received two in 1978, one from the General Telephone Company. In 2003 we received an FFGC state award, a

Deep South regional award and a National Garden Club award for historic garden preservation. In 2015, the Secret Garden was completely refurbished. The original tabby concrete had cracked and become dangerous, so the pathways were redone. This time the garden was planned to be an educational garden for palm trees that do well in Sarasota and a Butterfly Garden. Catherine La Brie and I were consulted for plant selection. It was still planted, as it is today, in a cottage style, the way Mable did it. Most of our bedding plants were lost during the hurricanes. Because of the recent cold weather, we have been unable to plant. We hope to start replanting in about two weeks, so that Mable's Secret Garden will be colorful once again.

Our Secret Garden Gang now has 10 people. If you would be interested in becoming a part of our group, please let me know. There are special procedures that need to be followed to become a Ringling Volunteer which I will be happy to explain.

Please stop and see the poster display. You will see photos of the garden covered with turf, what it looked like after the Boy Scouts dug it out in the "That Was Then" poster. There is a photo essay showing what we did in the "This is How 2003" poster. We have a poster made for a Flower Show Educational Exhibit with a wonderful timeline about the Secret Garden. The last poster was a recruiting one for Secret Garden Gang Members. That one has a letter from Kathrine Harris and from John Wetanhall.

I would like to recognize the two other original Secret Garden Gang members – Sue Angle and Sharon Davisson.



Below are some of Livy's Display Boards depicting the History of the Secret Garden and SGC



