



HERNDON, VIRGINIA

Margaret Thomas' Gardens

Irises in Virginia



Margaret Thomas and her husband George moved onto their Herndon, VA, property in 1963. Margaret started an iris garden with irises donated by her neighbor. Widowed in 1974, she supported herself and her son by selling irises and vegetables. Since then, for over 30 years, she has opened her gardens to photographers, painters, school groups, community adult education classes and many others. The garden has become a landmark for the area and provides community identity: it also is the last open space left on the busy Reston-Fairfax corridor. Margaret Thomas (now 84) is not in a financial position to donate her land to Fairfax County. However, if the land could be saved via a conservation easement, the garden could be run using the revenue from the sale of the plants and grant funding, along with the potential use of the property as a “Sustainable Technology Center”. An established corps of volunteers would carry out many of the seasonal gardening tasks.

HISTORY

Margaret Thomas and her husband George moved to 12410 Lawyer's Road in 1963. Margaret started her garden with irises from her neighbor, a member of the Chesapeake and Potomac Iris Society, who presented her with some irises “over the fence - that were much prettier than mine”. This was the beginning of Margaret Thomas' Gardens. She joined the Chesapeake and Potomac Chapter of the American Iris Society in 1973. A year later, she found herself widowed with a young



son - and a thriving collection of irises. She applied for and received a tax number in 1976. She sold irises and vegetables to support herself and her son and to afford to expand the size and variety of her gardens to include collections of peonies and daylilies. For more than 30 years, Margaret Thomas has opened her gardens to photographers, painters, school groups, community adult education classes and the general public. Volunteers have helped Margaret in her garden for many reasons, for many hours, over many years.

Margaret's friends and supporters formed the "Friends of Margaret's Gardens" in 2003. One of their main goals was to convince the Fairfax County Park Authority to include the land at 12410 Lawyer's Road on the Fairfax County Park Bond. In May 2003 and May 2004, the Friends ran Open Houses to raise awareness and ask supporters to sign petitions and write letters to the Park Authority. However, the Fairfax County Park Authority had received two other large tracts of land in 2003, as gifts, which took much of its time and focus. Thus the future of Margaret Thomas' Gardens is not yet secure.

Each year, the need to preserve Margaret Thomas' Gardens becomes more apparent. People have come to recognize it as a local "mainstay" that reinforces our community identity and coherence. The Gardens also is the last open space remaining on the busy Reston-Fairfax corridor, and it provides a lovely scenic respite for the commuters in this changing area. Everyone needs places to play - whether this "play" is gardening, flying a kite, walking a dog or playing soccer or football. There is a field next to the flower gardens that can be used for all these activities if it is saved as open space.

However, Margaret Thomas' Gardens is also an ideal site on which to implement a "growing" educational need! Fairfax ReLeaf is a 15 year old non-profit whose mission is to plant and preserve trees in Northern Virginia, preserving the Northern Virginia canopy. There is room at Margaret Thomas' Gardens for much needed additional tree nursery space: in fact, Fairfax ReLeaf has grown trees on this land for 3 years. Along with growing trees, Fairfax ReLeaf helps citizens to understand the value of stewarding trees to offset human carbon use and storm water run-off, among other things. Thus Margaret Thomas' Gardens could permanently serve as a "Sustainable Living" educational center where people could learn about:

- the importance of trees in cleaning the air;
- creating buffers for the storm water run-off to save the Chesapeake Bay;
- the benefits of Low Impact Development; and
- how to identify and control harmful invasive plant species.

To quote Baba Diom...

"We only save what we love. We only love what we know. We only know what we have been taught."

Margaret Thomas' Gardens, with its history and beauty, is already a much-visited spot. Here is a rare remaining opportunity to adapt an existing historic property for a much-needed public use that - through education, preservation, and play - will benefit both people and the environment.

THE THREAT

Margaret Thomas is 84 years old and wants to retire from the daily task of keeping the gardens and selling the iris, peonies and daylilies. She would like to see her work maintained for the better good of the community. She is not in a financial position to donate her land to Fairfax County; neither has the County awoken to the urgent need to secure this site, which has become such an integral part of the area's history and the life of the community.



Margaret Thomas' Gardens has been maintained for 30 years with one full time gardener and an assistant gardener. Neighborhood volunteer weeding parties are scheduled during the pre-garden opening time. Once the land is saved in a conservation easement, the garden will be capable of operating on the revenue from the sale of the plants, historic preservation and conservation grant funding, and from income and grants generated by some of its environmental education programs.

Many local groups and citizens support the initiative to save Margaret Thomas' Gardens. These include the Friends of Margaret's Gardens, Sustainable Living Educational Group, Fairfax ReLeaf, the Virginia Department of Forestry, Lands and Waters, Earth Sangha, the Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District, The Potomac Conservancy, the Vale Arts Group, and the many citizens of Northern Virginia who have signed petitions and otherwise endorsed this effort.

The multi-year effort to procure Fairfax County support and funding to acquire and preserve Margaret Thomas' Gardens is nearing fruition. Various Fairfax County agencies are collaborating to ensure continued public enjoyment of these gardens and open space. A final decision is expected this summer.

HOW TO HELP

Write or email the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and the Fairfax Park Authority at:

Supervisor Catherine M. Hudgins
Hunter Mill District Representative
Fairfax County Board of Supervisors
North County Government Center
12000 Bowman Towne Drive
Reston, Virginia 20190-3307

William G Bouie
Hunter Mill District Representative
Fairfax County Park Authority Board
12055 Government Center Parkway, Suite 927
Fairfax, VA 22035-1118

Donate. Make checks to Fairfax ReLeaf Garden Fund. Mail to: Fairfax ReLeaf, P.O. Box 710691, Herndon, VA 20171-0691

Come volunteer. Join us for gardening chores every Tuesday and Friday from 3 p.m. to dusk! You might even start collecting irises and daylilies!

Research

- A power point presentation of the potential "Sustainable Living Education Center " is available upon request from Kay Fowler, Fairfax ReLeaf, P.O. Box 710691, Herndon, VA 20171-0691, klfowlerus@yahoo.com, tel. 703-324-1409.
- A Low Impact Development Site Improvement Plan also is available from Kay Fowler, Fairfax ReLeaf.

Site Address

Margaret Thomas' Gardens
12410 Lawyer's Road
Herndon, Virginia 20171

Learn, preserve, and play at Margaret Thomas' Gardens!