"Innisfree is a post-war masterpiece — PERIOD"
Charles Birbaum, President and Founder
The Cultural Landscape Foundation (2014)

There are many possible routes through the garden. Visitors are encouraged to enjoy the journey.
Like the pyramids of Egypt or the Great Wall of China, Innisfree helps us to define what we mean by ‘civilization’. It’s one of the few places in this world that lived up to — nay, exceeded — my expectations.


Recognized as one of the “world’s ten best gardens,” Innisfree is a powerful icon of mid-twentieth century design. Over fifty years in the making, it is the work of landscape architect Lester Collins, FASLA (1914–1993), with important contributions by his clients, artist and teacher Walter Beck and gardener and heiress Marion Burt Beck. At its core, Innisfree is about the individual’s experience in nature. Inviting exploration and even contemplation, Collins’ sweeping landscape merges the essence of Modernist and Romantic ideas with traditional Chinese and Japanese garden design principles in a form that evolved through subtle handling of the site and slow manipulation of its ecology. The result is a distinctly American stroll garden — a sublime composition of rock, water, wood, and sky achieved with remarkable economy and grace.

In the late 1920s, Walter and Marion Beck began work on Innisfree, their country residence in Millbrook, New York. Walter Beck’s fascination with Asian art influenced his painting, the collecting he and his wife pursued, their ideas on garden design, and ultimately supplied lasting inspiration for Innisfree. In the 1930s, Beck discovered the work of 8th-century Chinese poet, painter and garden maker Wang Wei. Studying scroll paintings of his famed garden, the Wangchuan Villa, Beck observed that Wang created carefully defined, inwardly focused gardens and garden vignettes within a larger, naturalistic landscape. Wang’s place-making technique — christened ‘cup gardens’ by Beck — influenced centuries of Chinese and thus Japanese garden design. It is also the principal design motif in the Innisfree landscape. Like his Chinese predecessor, Beck created three-dimensional pictures in the garden, incorporating both rocks from the site and horticultural advice from his wife. Unlike Wang Wei, or perhaps the more familiar William Kent and Frederick Law Olmsted, who composed landscape pictures to draw one through a sequence of events and create an overall sense of place, Beck focused on individual compositions. Relating these to each other and to the landscape as a whole was the genius of Lester Collins.

Walter and Marion Beck met Lester Collins early in 1938 when Collins was an undergraduate at Harvard. That spring, this trio began their long and remarkable collaboration on the garden in Millbrook. In 1939 and 1940, Collins traveled through Asia with fellow landscape architect John O. Simonds. He received his Master of Landscape Architecture degree from Harvard’s Graduate School of Design in 1942—the place and the moment when Modernism truly arrived on the American design scene. Following service in World War II, Collins joined the Harvard faculty and quickly became Dean of Harvard’s landscape architecture department. In 1954, Collins spent a year in Japan as a Fulbright Scholar, studying traditional garden design and construction methods, and working with Japanese scholars to create perhaps the first English translation of the 1000-year-old Sakuteiki, the seminal Secret Garden Book. This text urges gardeners to study nature and great gardens but to build the essence rather than a copy—exactly what both Beck and Collins sought to do at Innisfree. On returning to the United States, Collins went into private practice. Key projects include the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden, multiple commissions for the National Zoo, and the Enid A. Haupt Garden, all for the Smithsonian in Washington, DC; the American Embassy in Cairo; as well as the town plan for Miami Lakes, Florida, which established a new model for communities in the region. To an unusual degree, Collins combined the intellectual, the pragmatic, and the intuitive in his work, all of which can be felt at Innisfree, the masterwork of this master designer.
Western gardens are usually designed to embrace a view of the whole. Little is hidden. The garden, like a stage set, is there in its entirety, its overall design revealed in a glance. The traditional Chinese garden is usually designed so that a view of the whole is impossible. It requires a stroll over serpentine, seemingly aimless arteries. The observer walks into a series of episodes, like Alice through the looking glass.

Having no children, the Becks decided to endow a foundation for the “study of garden art at Innisfree” that would create a public garden and study center much like Dumbarton Oaks, in Washington, DC. Plans changed when Marion Beck died in 1959 after an illness that consumed her financial resources. Without the anticipated endowment, the nonprofit had to raise money to settle the Becks’ debts simply to secure ownership of the property. It succeeded, opening to the public in 1960. In the early 1970s, Innisfree sold land surrounding the 185-acre garden core to Rockefeller University for use as a research station and preserve, allowing some small measure of financial security. Innisfree is unique as the creation of a single landscape architect in both private and public incarnations. After helping create a private retreat for the Becks, Collins orchestrated its material transition to a public space that would sustain and survive public attention. Lester Collins also helped the Becks craft the original mission for Innisfree Foundation and then shaped the nonprofit that exists today. Throughout his career, including his 55-year association with Innisfree, Lester Collins evidenced a superb ability to read and respond to a site, and choreograph movement through space. Collins created the dreamlike sequence of vignettes that defines Innisfree by drawing on these skills, as well as the episodic, Alice-in-Wonderland aspects of traditional Chinese and Japanese gardens, the jazz-like syncopations of Modernism, the Romantic belief that wild landscapes touch something essential in individuals, and the ideas of abstraction and asymmetrical balance common to all. To have done this for wealthy clients, as in his 20-year collaboration with the Becks, would be remarkable. To have created much of present day Innisfree in the face of serious economic constraints is extraordinary.

Like the great Chinese Masters of the landscape, [Collins] listened to the garden itself when making his improvements.

To create a viable public garden on limited means, Lester Collins simplified the estate’s design but strengthened its sensibilities and doubled the garden area. Well ahead of his peers, Collins worked with the site’s natural systems to develop sustainable garden design and maintenance practices that are still implemented at Innisfree today. When wetlands were typically filled, Collins embraced the abundance of bogs as key aesthetic and functional features. Like managed meadows, he gently shifted these ecosystems over time to favor visually diverse plant communities. In some, he left large trees and shrubs, in others, he removed them to reveal the likes of blueberries and pitcher plants. Native rose mallows were encouraged, and elsewhere, hardy lotus were introduced. To correct an algae problem in the largely static glacial lake, Collins began to pump water from a nutrient-rich layer of the lake up to the reservoir. Moving down through waterfalls and bogs, this water is naturally aerated and filtered, keeping the lake clear. As funds allowed, he opened portions of the Becks’ densely wooded site to leave magnificent trees and natives like blueberries, iris and ferns and increased ways to explore the garden, like making the first route around the lake with construction of the Channel Crossing bridge in 1969. He created new cup gardens; designed extraordinary water features like the Mist, the Water Sculpture, the Air Spring, and the Fountain Jet; sculpted fanciful berms along the Entrance Drive, the Front Lawn, and around Tiptoe Rock; and added plants like Japanese primroses, Joe Pye weed, and columnar maples to create a living collection that is unpretentious by design and undemanding by requirement. Sitewide, plants naturalize and are then edited, creating a casual air of wildness. Collins found the cup garden to be infinitely scalable — a mossy rock or the entire site — and infinitely flexible — individual compositions can be rebalanced as elements change over time, like reorganizing a flower arrangement as the first blossoms fade.

In traditional Chinese and Japanese fashion, Collins used his deep site knowledge and clear design ideas to build the garden without a drawing. In this way, he experimented and refined his design from 1938 until his death in 1993. Maintaining the cup garden concepts of Wang Wei and the soaring spirit of place he and the Becks celebrated, Lester Collins drew on art and science to create one of the most singular landscape experiences in the world. To capture these ideas, Collins wrote *Innisfree: An American Garden* (1994). A 1994 New York Times article by Anne Raver said the garden showed “such respect for the land” that Innisfree and this book “could change how we see gardens, in much the same way as William Robinson’s *Wild Garden* shook up the formal English garden 100 years ago.”

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The genius of this place lies not so much in the ideas which the designers formulated for the cup gardens, many of which are disarmingly simple, but in the way they have been maintained over the years. Essentially, everything is allowed to settle into the prevailing spirit of the place; if it does not, it is removed. It is this sensitivity, care and attention to the qualities of landscape, natural and made, that make Innisfree such a memorable success.

[Lester Collins] left behind a legacy and an influence. He has shaped the earth, and taught others to shape the earth. Lester Collins had some good answers, and always offered a genuine response to the problems facing designers. His answers were based on real people and how they move and interact with the environment. He even had some handle on the question which we often forget while busily supplying answers: how do we shape the human environment to foster the good things shared by people of all cultures — peace, awareness, beauty? Charles W. Moore, FAIA, Foreword to Innisfree: An American Garden (1994)

Innisfree is a post-war masterpiece that acknowledges its design roots in the continuum of history, encompasses groundbreaking innovations in sustainable landscape design and maintenance, and stands as a unique and deeply personal work of art. By abstracting natural and art historical forms, and even natural processes, Collins created a designed landscape that brings visitors closer to the essential qualities of nature itself.

Innisfree Foundation preserves and shares Innisfree Garden and the legacy of landscape architect Lester Collins. Since 1960, this small, 501(c)3 nonprofit has invited the public to explore and enjoy this distinctly American stroll garden. Today, Innisfree Foundation is working to ensure that this remarkable 185-acre site will remain a source of wonder and respite for future generations, and to create programming that enhances public understanding and appreciation of this extraordinary landmark. If you believe in the power of place and the importance of wonder in all of our lives, please join us and make a donation to support Innisfree today.
The Point With (left to right) Turtle, Dragon, and Owl Rocks