



The pool pavilion at the Virginia Robinson Gardens in Beverly Hills.

A Living Legacy

Virginia Robinson lived in her estate for 66 years and willed it to Los Angeles County for everyone to see and enjoy. BY DEBORAH BELGUM

The famed Robinson Department store may be long gone, but the family's legacy lives on in a six-acre Beverly Hills estate in California that has been open to the public for 45 years.

Known as the Virginia Robinson Gardens, the compound was built in 1911 by Harry and Virginia Robinson, who wed in 1903 and took a long honeymoon to Europe, India and Kashmir, where the newlyweds collected merchandise for the family department store and themselves.

Returning to Los Angeles, California, they were driving one day to the new Los Angeles Country Club when they got lost and ended up on a barren hilltop. What they saw was a view of the Santa Monica Mountains on one side and, on the other side, the plains below that would become the incorporated city of Beverly Hills in 1914.

In love with the property, they bought this large, treeless patch of land at 1008 Elden Way, surrounded mostly by barley fields, from Burton Green, a Beverly Hills founder. Immediately they began constructing a Beaux Arts-style mansion designed by Virginia's father, Nathaniel Dryden, an architect and builder. A year later, the Beverly Hills Hotel was constructed a few blocks away, where it was more of a Western-style resort with horseback riding tours than a fabled hideaway for Hollywood celebrities.

Once the mansion was built, it was time to create a lush tropical forest of Australian king palms, an Italian terrace garden and two rose gardens to go along with the tennis court and pool, which was later expanded to become 50-foot long.

Thirteen years later, at the other side of their great lawn that can accommodate up to 450 people, they added a 3,000-square-foot Italianate pool pavilion with a billiard room, bathrooms and a second-floor card room, because Virginia was an avid card player.

When Virginia died in 1977, at the age of 99 and childless, she willed the historic estate to Los Angeles County, which has been operating it for decades as a historic site open for paid tours (\$15 for adults) and free student educational programs.

"This is such a treasure," says Phil Savenick, president of the Beverly Hills Historical Society. "Not only is it the first estate built in Beverly Hills before it was a city, but also because Virginia donated her estate as an as-is museum that shows exactly what it was like to live during the golden era of the early 20th century."

The county, under the Department of Parks and Recreation, spends about \$1 million a year to maintain the gardens with the help of five full-time gardeners, and to tend to the mansion, which is preserved as it was in 1977. Fundraising efforts by the Friends of Robinson Gardens, which has about 135 members, has contributed as much as \$320,000 a year for various maintenance, restoration and educational projects.

"As you can imagine, there is a lot of upkeep involved in maintaining such a historic building...the pool pavilion

and other structures. There is constant upkeep," says Diane Sipos, superintendent of the Virginia Robinson Gardens. "And we have to make sure all the artifacts inside are preserved."

The artifacts inside the 12-room house encompassing 6,000 square feet are extensive. There is an entire library, where the Robinsons served cocktails to their guests before dinner, with 3,000 leather-bound books and antique furniture.

The living room features a Chickering baby grand piano, couches covered in gold-colored fabric, heavy drapes and crystal chandeliers. There is Virginia's bedroom, where one of her petite dresses is displayed on a mannequin. In her dressing room, outside the master bathroom, her personal silver brush and comb set sits next to a small silver perfume flask with her first name engraved on the front.

At the end of a long gallery is a 19th-century gilt-metal birdcage with four taxidermied iridescent hummingbirds that sing, moving their heads and beaks, when a key is wound up on the side. The early automaton appeared in the 1934 movie "The Gay Divorcee," starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. The Robinsons also loaned one of their three Duesenberg cars, which are no longer at the mansion, to the film.

To one side of the house is the Italian terrace garden with acres of Mediterranean plants and entertaining water features, such as steps with a narrow water canal running down the side. The dominant tree species include the Southern magnolia, a grove of persimmons and historic



The Italian garden at the Virginia Robinson Gardens.

specimen trees. The largest coral tree in California is there, originating from South Africa.

To the other side of the mansion is the extensive palm forest, which has some 1,000 king palm trees, the largest collection in the U.S. Meandering walkways down a hillside lead to ponds and sitting areas.

"Virginia and Harry traveled the world to buy things for their department store. And whenever they saw a plant they liked, they would have it sourced and sent back to Beverly Hills," Savenick notes. "The plants at Virginia's house are like no other place."

The family's department store legacy began in 1883 with Virginia's father-in-law, Joseph Winchester Robinson, opening the Boston Dry Goods Store on a busy downtown L.A. street corner. In 1891, the store's name was changed to J.W. Robinson Co. and over the years it opened several locations across California and Arizona.

In 1924, Virginia's husband, Harry, became president of the department store chain until he passed away in 1932. At that time, Virginia became chairwoman of the business until 1962. The department store chain was acquired five years before her retirement by Associated Dry Goods, which later was acquired in 1986 by the May Co., which was purchased in 2005 by Macy's. That's when the Robinson-May department stores were either shuttered or rolled into the Macy's nameplate.

Virginia never remarried, but she continued to organize

extravagant soirées, dinners, fundraising parties and cocktail events with the help of a 21-member staff headed by a mayordomo.

Known as the first lady of Beverly Hills, she entertained the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and numerous Hollywood stars, including Marlene Dietrich, Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire, Mae West, Charlie Chaplin and Sophia Loren.

Virginia's good friend Lillian Disney, the widow of Walt Disney, had her second wedding at the estate in 1969.

"Virginia threw three parties a week and one of them was a formal party," Savenick says. "She threw a party every year called the 'Harvest Moon Ball,' which helped raise money for the Dorothy Chandler Music Center. Dorothy was a good friend."

When the Los Angeles Philharmonic opened its summer season at the Hollywood Bowl, she would have them repeat their first performance on her expansive lawn for her guests to enjoy and raise money for the organization.

The days of those big events are gone, but the property, which has only 35 parking spaces, is still rented out for small gatherings and fundraisers. No more than 100 members of the public may visit the grounds a day, according to the garden's latest environmental impact report. But the county is trying to change that to bring in more visitors to the estate, which is open Monday through Saturday.

Fashion labels, too, have visited the property, and Stella McCartney, Nike and Alo Moda have all conducted fashion shoots there. In 2015, the Martha Stewart Weddings magazine did a photo shoot with actor Sofia Vergara posing in a Chantilly lace wedding dress in front of the bright pink bougainvillea near the tennis court.

The Friends of Robinson Gardens, founded in 1982, has been instrumental in keeping the estate up and running. The nonprofit's fundraising efforts help restore various elements of the house and other structures, the interior décor, furniture and the gardens.

Evelyn Carlson, the group's treasurer, said that on average, the nonprofit raises \$250,000 to \$300,000 a year for restoration projects.

And some of those projects have been extensive. At one point, there was an \$80,000 overhaul of the irrigation system to make it more water efficient, and a leaky pool in need of repair, which required historic tiles to be removed and numbered to make sure they were returned to the proper location.

"When you have a historic estate, you can't just call in anybody," Carlson says. "If we replace fabric in the house, we have to do historic research. Maintaining a historic estate is different than maintaining a regular house."

The Friends of Robinson Gardens also raise about \$70,000 a year, mostly through grants, for student educational programs that every year bring L.A. elementary school students to the gardens to learn about horticulture, growing vegetable gardens, plants and pond animals.

"We get 2,000 students coming through that program every year," Carlson says. "The kids love it."



Virginia Robinson entertaining guests at her estate.