



Moonlight to Memories

Mina Edison's moonlight garden is being restored to its original splendor.

by Cathy Chestnut

IMAGINE AN 'OUTDOOR ROOM,' OPEN TO THE SKY but enclosed by tall trellises entwined with fuchsia-bright bougainvillea. Its centerpiece is an elongated reflecting pool, bordered predominately by white and blue flowers, all of the elements working together to reflect the light of the moon and stars in the tranquility of night.

In the early 1920s, when there was little urban light pollution, celestial light would have played a prominent role in moonlight gardens, a fairly popular feature for upper-class estates at the time. One writer has likened them to "a temple to the senses."

Like all gardening projects, even Mina Edison's intimate space for nocturnally communing with nature at her seasonal home in Fort Myers was a constant source of unfolding drama since its inception, and it still is today.

Mina had a reputation as a gardener and bird-lover, and she laid the groundwork of a garden with rosebushes, cypress, azalea and a vine trellis early on. In 1928, more formal plans were conceived when Thomas Edison's Fort Myers laboratory was disassembled and shipped to Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Mich. Their friends and Fort Myers neighbors, Henry and Clara Ford, financed a freestanding office for Thomas in the lab's place. Mina's moonlight garden, abutting the small structure, served as an extension of

the office, and together they filled the original laboratory footprint.

Her initial plan for the garden centered on a palette of pink, blue, white and yellow blooms that provided fragrant, winter blooms, according to a cultural landscape report commissioned by the Edison-Ford Winter Estates. Many species she chose did not thrive. The busy mother and wife of "The Wizard" struggled with the design before consulting in 1929 with renowned landscape architect Ellen Biddle Shipman, who had designed Mina's family garden in Chautauqua, N. Y., and the Fords' Michigan estate.

Shipman, who was esteemed in popular journals and affluent social circles, eventually specified two dozen plants that offered color and fragrance, including rosebushes, pink snapdragons, white and blue lilies, azalea, salvia, foxglove, violets, iris and white daisies. With commercial hybrids unavailable and knowledge of Southwest Florida's unique climatic and soil conditions somewhat of a mystery to Northerners, even many of Shipman's recommendations didn't fair well either. Many were the same types Mina had already tried.

"Some of them were used and some of them weren't," says Pam Miner, curator of the Edison-Ford Winter Estates.

The botanical varieties that did flourish were of interesting shapes, heights and variegations. Shipman favored artistically

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Courtesy: The Collection of the Edison-Ford Winter Estates, Ft. Myers, FL

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grouped "drift beds" that bloomed in different cycles year-round, according to the cultural landscape report, while relying on low hedges and shrubs for sophistication. (Ironically, native plants were excluded from the garden and Shipman failed to specify any night-blooming plants.)

After taking root, it became a source of pride for Mina and a locus of solitude for both Mina and Thomas, who no doubt stepped out of his office on occasion to relax with a cigar. The Edisons held part of a news conference there when President-elect Herbert Hoover visited the jungle-like compound on the banks of the Caloosahatchee and Mina showed it off to local gardening club women and other members of the community. Perhaps it offered solace after Thomas died in 1931.

"They definitely used the garden a lot," says Miner.

When a museum was built in 1965 at what was then known as the Edison

Estates, Mina's moonlight garden was transformed by son Charles Edison into a "memory garden" that contained a statue of his mother and a plaque with a poem he wrote. In addition to honoring Mina, the expense of maintaining short-lived perennials and annuals had become too much, so it was planted with hardier plant varieties.

But over the past year, workers have pulled it all out, too. Now, it's being restored to its original splendor under the guidance of Naples landscape architect Ellin Goetz.

"We're trying to interpret the site to 1928. We want people to experience it the way the Edisons did," says Miner.

Shipman's designs "reflected the things a lot of people wanted—a great sense of privacy and romantic, intimate gardening spaces," says Goetz. "It was enclosed with arbors and was envisioned to be a room that you entered."

Goetz is thrilled and impressed that detailed blueprints for Mina's garden are

extant, as well as the original pond, stepping stones, walkways and trellis structures, because most of Shipman's work no longer exists.

Goetz is still working on the horticultural plan, but says it will include flowering plants that provide color and fragrance.

"Our challenge is to restore it keeping the original concept, but not using the plants she used for the same reason—that they won't stand the test of time," says Goetz, noting that even today, garden design is always a work-in-progress. "That's the thing about gardens; they're fluid and experimental. That's the whole drama of garden design."

This fall, the Edison-Ford Winter Estates plans to host an exhibit of Shipman's blueprints and photographs from Cornell University's archives of Mina's garden and other projects. The exhibit will be housed in the original caretaker's cottage located next-door to the moonlight garden, which has traditionally been closed to the public.