



BIRD WALK
Milan Bull from the Connecticut Audubon Society, center, leading a recent bird walk through Oak Lawn's grounds.

Undiscovered Oak Lawn

MORE THAN A RESTING PLACE // BY DANIEL ENGLAND

» ZALMON Wakeman, a Fairfield farmer, died in 1864. He was not the only one in those days moving from this world to the next. The problem was that the cemeteries in Fairfield at the time, including the Old Burying Ground near the town hall, were full. A group of men at Greenfield Hill decided to buy Wakeman's 12 acres just off Bronson Road to create a new burying place. The Oak Lawn Cemetery Association was formed in 1865 and soon people were paying 20 cents a square foot for the choice lots.

Since then, more than 23,000 souls, many of them Fairfield founding families, have opted to rest in this tranquil property just behind the Ogden House. But the space is much more than a cemetery, the mature trees here are so grand and unusual, in fact, that Oak Lawn was designated a recognized, accredited arboretum. The tree planting tradition began in earnest around 1907 when the redoubtable Mabel Osgood Wright along with her good friend Annie B. Jennings took a keen interest in Oak Lawn at the turn of

the last century. Their efforts have continued. For example, since the cemetery is part of Greenfield Hill it is no wonder that it has, near the entrance, a magnificent 50-year old flowering Dogwood. There is also a Scarlet Oak, another native of the eastern

U.S., with leaves that turn deep scarlet in autumn. And it even boasts a Giant Sequoia growing small of stature but strong of purpose. Just give it another couple of thousand years and you'll really be impressed. It's num-



KITCHEN GARDEN Fairfield Garden Club member Whitney Vose is a colonial plant enthusiast, and was instrumental in guiding the club to bring Ogden House garden back to the way Jane Ogden might have had it. Garden club members yearly produce Ogden House Honey with its beehives. Newly renovated this year, the kitchen garden has

ber five on a 24 tree tour that makes for a pleasant 30-minute walk among historic trees and lives remembered in stone.

Speaking of trees, there are two kinds of tree-like incursions that have been removed— an aggressive species named the Ailanthus and its malevolent friend, the Japanese Knotweed. Thanks largely to a grant from the CT Department of Environmental Protection and the efforts of a single-minded man named Dean Powers, a cemetery landscaper, the parcel these plants took over is now reclaimed and the way is clear for a modest park

right near the Mill River, which flows through the property. “Our motivation was to restore that part of our land to its native state for the enjoyment of visitors,” says Bronson K. Hawley, president of the cemetery association. Joggers especially enjoy the five miles of paved road with virtually no traffic.

In fact there’s planned clearing of trees that still takes place when new burial sections are opened. All those cuttings and brush are gathered together and Oak Lawn workers and machines turn them into mountains of valuable mulch that is used around the property.

Adding to the natural, even colonial atmosphere of the place are beehives that buzz away near the entrance to the cemetery, tended by Whitney Vose of the Fairfield Garden Club. Not far away sits the historic 1750 Ogden House owned and managed by the Fairfield Museum & History Center. Happily, the colonial garden that was so important to the Ogden family has been replicated and meticulously maintained by the Fairfield Garden Club.

There’s also a relatively new addition to Oak Lawn. On Armed Forces Day in 2014, people gathered to

dedicate the Oak Lawn Cemetery Veterans Memorial, now a completed vision of the current board of directors. The hope is that when people visit they will also “pause, reflect, and give thanks for the sacrifices that have been made by so many in service to our country,” as Hawley said at the ceremony.

Of course, Oak Lawn was recently in the news for more than its lovely grounds. Actress Mary Tyler Moore was buried there in 2017. Her memorial may be, for some, reason enough to make Oak Lawn a destination to visit, but it’s beauty makes it worth stopping in for a nature walk.

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