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**Planting the Suburban Dream:
The landscaping of Twinbrook Neighborhoods in Rockville, Maryland.**

In October of 1946, Twinbrook Incorporated purchased a little more than 202 acres of farmland just outside of Rockville, Maryland, from Miss Lillian M. Small. Miss Small had used the land for herself and her sister as a healthful retreat from nearby D.C., and as it was not her primary residence, she leased it for productive use by tenant wheat farmers.¹ Within the next ten years, Miss Small's land and the rolling rural countryside just beyond the city of Rockville was transformed dramatically. The earth was graded, roads were carved, and foundations were laid. The whole landscape was wiped clean, and then sculpted into the suburban dream of developer Joseph Geeraert. The development of the Twinbrook neighborhoods is a prime example of the suburban expansion endemic to the United States in the 1950s, when post-war tract housing was produced en masse to meet the demand of the burgeoning middle-class and sold as individual slices of American Pie. As part of a comprehensive study of the Twinbrook neighborhoods prepared by the graduate seminar in historic preservation at George Washington University, it is the purpose of this paper to examine the botanical environment created by the developer and later cultivated by residents, and to identify and document plantings and gardening trends, both in front and backyards, as well as along streetscapes.

¹ Twinbrook Life Vol II, No 2. Page 7. January 27th, 1955.

Developers of suburban tract homes had the role of converting the countryside into a landscape that conveyed modernity. This was done through the use of modern architecture, orientation around a car culture, the use of modern materials such as asbestos, as well as through the use of only the newest, most modern appliances. Another essential method through which they tamed the countryside and sculpted suburbia was through the landscaping.

Abraham Levitt, one of the fathers of the post-war suburban tract housing development, tried to convey the importance of landscape maintenance and planting to homeowners and educate them about proper care through newspaper articles and helpful tips in homeowner's guides. According to Levitt, "No single feature of a suburban residential community contributes so much to the character and beauty of the individual home and locality as well-kept lawns." Stabilized home values would most often be found in neighborhoods where lawns showed as green carpets and trees and shrubbery joined to "impart the sense of residential elegance," while areas that possessed neglected lawns and landscape material would be publicly shunned. In one guide for homeowners, Levitt explained that the initial investment in proper landscaping would be large at the beginning, but unlike furniture, houses, and most material things that tend to depreciate with the years, the lawn, trees, and shrubs would become only more valuable over time.²

In the beginning, planting successful landscaping was no easy task; historically, soil quality was a predicament faced by anyone in any suburban tract-housing development. Earth in these areas was primarily fill dirt, compacted by tractors, trucks, and materials, with a thin layer of top soil that came from the sod thrown down by developers. Beyond the sturdier plants chosen by the developer as initial plantings, successful gardens required

² Levitt Abraham, The Lawn and Its Upkeep.

owners to condition the soil with sawdust, nitrogen fertilizer, water, and aeration.³ Even when the initial plantings were well-rooted, later pests, diseases, and conflicts with utilities might necessitate removal. It is the objective of this paper to consider the history of the landscaping, as well as what is currently present.

Visual surveys, photos from which have been included, played an important role in identifying resources currently present, and original landscape drawings helped inform the recognition of plantings. The neighborhood newsletter, which historically published columns with gardening advice and information on blights and insects affecting the area, also assisted with identifying plantings and gardening trends. When it came to identifying plants, I relied heavily on comparing bark-textures and general plant-shapes with pictures in guidebooks and on the internet. The recent budding of spring has relieved much anxiety about the mis-identification of flora, but it should be known that I am not a tree or plant specialist and it is possible that I have mis-named specimens. With that disclaimer, I believe I have been able to identify numerous landscape elements and planting trends that may be specific to 1950's suburban tract housing developments.

Before I examine the landscaping within individual, I wish to address the most prominent specimens that are in existence today and that appeared throughout my surveys: the mature street trees. Driving through Twinbrook, both north and south of Viers Mill Road, one cannot fail to notice the trees planted uniformly along both sides of the road, with gnarled roots bulging from sidewalks and branches arching above to form sheltered boulevards.

³ Twinbrook Life Vol 1 No 1. sept 15th 1954. Page 5

In 1914, Maryland passed the Roadside Tree Law enforced by the Forest Service in the Department of Natural Resources. There was a consensus that street trees were of great economic, environmental, and aesthetic value, and the law was intended to protect and encourage the planting and maintenance of such trees.⁴ In the 1950s, in continuation with the ideology of the 1914 Roadside Tree Law, Montgomery County made a big push to get homeowners to plant street trees, and provided lists of suggested trees. Silver and Red Maples were some of the cheapest suggestions available, and they were planted by the thousands.² Today it is not uncommon to find mature specimens in front and back yards, red maples are planted along nearly every street throughout Twinbrook.

The majority of the existing red maples are large, mature trees, and are likely to be more than 30 years old. In February of 1955, an editorial appeared in Twinbrook Life, the neighborhood newsletter: Mary Archer of the Twinbrook Beautification Committee was advertising red maples, available at a range of 5 ft to 9 ft. tall and at an “exceptionally reasonable cost.” In the editorial, she explained that the trees were of bare-root stock and had to be planted in March to give them a chance to set in before spring. If enough people were interested, arrangements could be made for a truck to distribute the trees throughout the neighborhood.⁵ Perhaps many of the red maples we see today came from those advertised by Mrs. Archer.

Red maples were mostly likely suggested by Montgomery County and chosen by the Twinbrook Beautification Committee as a street tree because maples are known to be

⁴ Gazette Community News. Wednesday Sept 4th, 2002. Page A-4. Woman’s Gum Tree is Root of her Worries.

² Ron Podell. MCS, February 10th, 1998. Disease taking toll on Rockville trees..

⁵ Twinbrook Life Vol II, No 2. Page 6. Feb 15th 1955

relatively inexpensive, to grow quickly, and to provide nice shade. The Red maple is considered a medium-sized forest tree, growing approximately 50-70 ft high and 1- 2 ft in diameter, with a fairly long trunk, irregularly shaped crown, and a shallow root system. The leaves are simple, undivided blades about 4 inches in diameter, typically three lobbed, and turn scarlet in the autumn. The flowers of the tree are reddish, appearing in the early spring long before leaves begin to show. The fruit matures in late spring, appearing more or less like V shaped wings about $\frac{3}{4}$ inches long, and spiral to the ground in the autumn. The bark of young trees is smooth and gray, but appears shaggy and dark brown on older specimens.⁶ Although the Red Maple is widespread throughout Twinbrook, the tree has been noted for two drawbacks: weak wood and a shallow root system that has the annoying habit of buckling side-walks. Maples also seek water, and their root systems sometimes interfere with sewer lines. Further discussion on the drawbacks of the Red Maple and other plantings will be discussed presently.

Besides the Red Maple, there are a few other varieties of mature trees that appear along streets or in yards throughout Twinbrook. The sweetgum tree is a large timber tree, 80- 120 ft tall and 3-4 ft in diameter, with a long tapering trunk and pyramidal or oblong crown. The leaves are alternate and simple, star shaped with serrate margins, and somewhat fragrant when crushed. The fruit is a woody spherical head about 1” in diameter, composed of many spiky capsular units, each releasing one or two winged seeds. The bark is furrowed into narrow, sometimes flaky ridges. The benefit in sweetgum trees is that they will grow in a wide range of places and in dry soils. In the north, the tree is often planted as an ornamental; and when the autumn frosts come, the leaves turn to a bright scarlet.⁶

⁶ William M. Harlow. Trees of the Eastern and Central United States and Canada. Page 245.

⁶ Ibid. Page 193.

In addition to the occasional sweetgum along the street line, there is the sporadic presence of a mature Sycamore. The Sycamore is a large timber tree that grows from 80 to 100 ft tall and 3- 8 ft. in diameter. The sycamore usually has a continuous tapering trunk, or splits near the ground into several large limbs terminating in crooked branchlets. The leaves of the Sycamore are alternate, simple, with three to five lobes. A spherical brownish fruit about 1 inch in diameter is born on a long woody stem, and are often called “button balls.” The bark is most striking feature, mottled creamy white and brown, the former where the old bark peels off; at the base of old trees, almost entirely brown and flaky.⁶

Another species of mature tree present in Twinbrook is the American elm, with its distinctive vase-link shape. Growing between 60-80 feet tall and 3-4 ft in diameter with a trunk that divides into several arching limbs. The leaves are simple and more or less elliptical, growing 4-6 inches long and 1 to 3 inches wide. The bark of the elm is gray and furrowed, and eventually divides into interlacing ridges. American elm is one of the most widespread and well known native trees, and in the north is the favorite shade tree for street planting. Unfortunately, the recent introduction of Dutch elm disease threatens American elm nearly to extinction and efforts are being made to locate and destroy all infected trees.⁶

Twinbrook has for years struggled with issues of disease and maintenance of their street trees, and in 1998, Mayor Rose Krasnow and the City Council proposed the “Tree Master Plan for Twinbrook.” The plan, developed by the city’s Recreation and Parks Department, called for the removal of approximately 1420 of Twinbrook’s 4,500 street trees, and set further goals to diversify tree species within neighborhoods to further avoid large-scale losses of trees due to disease. The plan was in part a response to the bacterial

⁶ Ibid. Page 199.

⁶ Ibid. Page 169.

leaf scorch that has plagued the region's Pin Oaks. The disease causes plants to lose their leaves prematurely, making it difficult for plants to survive the winter. The danger is not only present for oak trees; in addition to affecting several species of oaks, leaf scorch is known to affect trees such as sycamore, red maple, dogwood, American elm, and other plantings such as peach, pear, coffee, and grapes. In addition, numerous shrubs and grasses can become infected with leaf scorch and act as carriers.⁷ The master plan was intended to serve as a blue print for replacing right-of-way trees that died, became diseased or created a hazard, with the intention of replacing trees over the next 40-80 years. In addition to addressing the diseased trees, the plan evaluated specimens that created hazardous conditions, such as trees with branches tangled in overhead power lines or roots that buckled sidewalks.⁸

Out of all the street trees identified, the most frequently occurring were red maples. Mature sycamores, elms, and sweetgums were also found occasionally as street trees, as well as in outcroppings within backyards. Oak trees were rarely found as street trees. Where trees have been removed, it seems that younger trees of the same kind have been replanted. No matter the species of tree, the presence and quantity of mature street trees is a significant element in the Twinbrook landscape.

When it came to examining the landscaping of individual lots, two sets of original landscape drawings done by Geereart and on file at Peerless Rockville Historic Preservation were of valuable assistance. While the drawings did not give particular plant names, the plans list the number of deciduous or ever-green trees and shrubs to be planted by the developer, the specific growth-heights of the plants, and where specifically the

⁷Official Site of the US Forestry Service. <http://www.na.fs.fed.us/fhp/bls/>. Bacterial Leaf Scorch.

⁸ Ron Podell. MCS, February 10th, 1998. Disease taking toll on Rockville trees.

plants were to be located around the home. Plans for a Cape-Cod home (refer to appendix) list four medium-growing evergreen shrubs to be placed at the front corners of the house, and deciduous shrubs, three high-growing and one medium-growing, to be placed near the front entrances. Plans for a split-level home (see appendix) indicate four evergreen shrubs, two medium and two low growing, to be placed at the front corners of the home and astride the entrance, with two medium-growing deciduous shrubs placed along the front elevation, two high-growing shrubs along a side elevation, and one towards the back. Both plans indicate that an area of 10' around the houses were to be sodded, with the remaining areas to be seeded. Landscape plans varied slightly for different home-models, but commonalities seemed to be the inclusion of ever-green shrubbery at the corners of the homes, at entrances, and at property lines- most likely for privacy screening. Since many of the Twinbrook homes included large family windows, plantings that shaded the windows would have also assisted with privacy. Images have been included in the appendix as examples.

Information on past Twinbrook gardening-trends was gathered from the neighborhood newsletter, which published columns with gardening advice as well as full-page spotlights on blights and insects affecting the area. As mentioned previously, soil quality was a predicament faced by anyone in any suburban tract-housing, and the gardening column offered tips for planting and maintaining healthy yards,⁹ advice on how to treat pests,¹⁰ suggestions on which perennials were the hardiest and most popular

⁹ Twinbrook Life, Vol IV, No. 4 May 1957. Page 6

¹⁰Twinbrook Life, Vol III, No 6- June 1956. The Enemy in Your Garden advised gardeners on aphids, spiders mites, leafhoppers, Japanese beetles, thrips, mealy bugs, Mexican bean beetles, and lace bugs that were plaguing the area

(daisies, lilies, phlox, chrysanthemums, and anemone), as well as advice on seasonal pruning.¹¹ The newsletter also encouraged adventurous landscapers to plan before they planted, to use the advice in the gardening column, or even better, participate in workshops offered on home landscape design.¹² Also appearing in the gardening column were spotlights on designs for outdoor living, reviews of various patios and other backyard amenities constructed by homeowners.¹³

Today, medium-sized deciduous plantings such as sourwoods, flowering dogwoods, and cucumber-trees (a pink-flowing magnolia), are commonly noted as landscaping plants that appear in the locations described by Geerearts plans, as well as throughout back yards. Laurels, crepe-myrtles, and forsythia, are also used. An article in the Twinbrook Life of 1958 announced that the Mayor of Rockville's sister city, Pinnesburg, Germany, had offered the area several hundred roses for beautification,¹⁴ and although further survey works is needed, it is possible that there exist roses in Twinbrook that came from Rockville's sister city.

The most easily identifiable yard landscaping that may have been original to the Geeraert plans are mature ever-green trees that would have been planted as a screen-hedge, or singularly a "center piece" near the front entrance of the home. Mature Eastern Red Cedars, also known as Red Cedar Junipers, are one of the ever-greens common in yardscapes throughout Twinbrook. Eastern Red Cedars are a small to medium-sized tree, 40-50 ft high and 1-2 ft. in diameter, with a dense, narrowly pyramidal or columnar-shaped

¹¹ VOL II, No 3. March 18th 1955-

¹² Twinbrook Life Vol 10. no 1 Jan 1963 Page 5

¹³ Twinbrook Life Vol. II- No 6. May 25th 1955- Page 4

¹⁴ Twinbrook Life, Vol V No 1. January 1958

crown often reaching the ground. The leaves are opposite, dark green, and on young trees or leading shoots are about ½ inches long, slender, and sharp pointed, but spikier on older trees. Usually both types of foliage can readily be found on the same tree. Flowers appear as small cones on different trees; male on one tree, female on another. The fruit of the Eastern red cedar is a bluish fleshy berrylike cone, ¼ to 1/3 inches in diameter. The bark is thin, reddish brown, weathering to gray, fibrous, somewhat flaky on the surface. There are many ornamental varieties of the Eastern red cedar and they are widely used in landscape plantings, one reason being that they can survive well in poor soils.

Eastern Hemlock is another a common ever-green that appears in Twinbrook, like the Eastern red cedar, as a “center piece” tree in a yard, or as hedging. Growing 60-70 ft tall and 2-3 ft in diameter, the hemlock can possess somewhat of a ragged outline if poorly pruned. Hemlocks display drooping terminal leader which tends to point away from the direction of the prevailing wind. Commonly used as an ornamental landscape planting, they will grow under considerable shade and may also be heavily trimmed and shaped, and in his book *Trees of the Eastern and Central United States and Canada*, Dr. William M. Harlow claims that Eastern hemlock are unexcelled as hedges.⁶

In the case of the Twinbrook neighborhoods, more than fifty years after the initial development, it is impossible to ignore various landscape elements such the common location of plantings around specific areas of a house, or the repeated use of a plant variety. As the homes themselves are often very similar, varying slightly from model to model, it becomes evident that along with the physical homes came a similar, but specific, type of suburban landscape. The widespread use of street trees adds a unifying affect, as well as the

⁶ Ibid. Page 65.

commonality of eastern red cedars and juniper varieties, hemlocks, and other plantings surrounding the homes.

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All of the following photographs were taken by the author and are available in higher quality upon request.



(Above: example of red maples as street trees. Left is... Right is Broadwood Avenue.
Below: over time, roots become crowded and can buckle the sidewalks and asphalt.)





Examples of ever-greens used as hedges and screens. Above is a hemlock at a property line. Below, in the background, is a stand of eastern red cedars.



Examples of plant locations near windows and at entryways to homes.



Example of ever-greens used to shield front picture window. To the far right of the picture is a mature Eastern red cedar.



Example of a “Cucumber Trees” growing as a “center piece” tree in a front yard. Note how they offer some protection for front-facing windows.



Example of a Dogwood (to the left) and a weeping cherry (to the right) as a “center piece” trees.



Example of a pruned Eastern red cedar (against the house). The tree in the center of the lawn is a red maple. Image to the right is of overgrown hemlocks around home.

