CLCS/Art 120: The Vassar Campus
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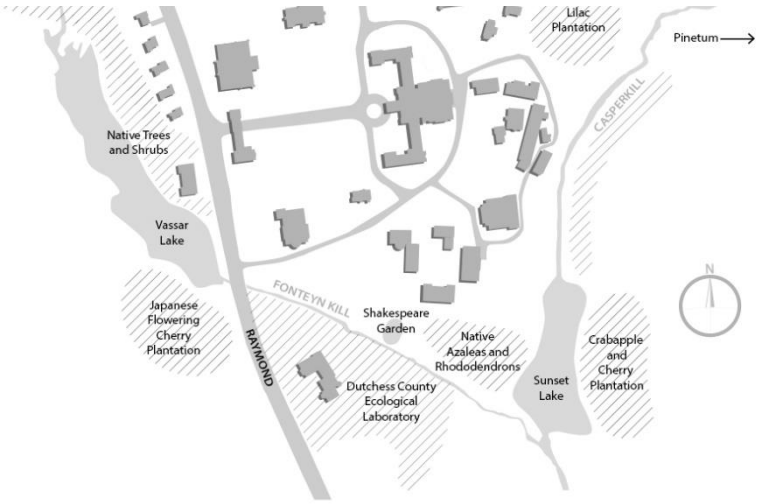
Ecology and Campus Landscape
With Prof. Margaret Ronsheim, Professor and Chair of Biology

Itinerary: Site of Edith Roberts' Dutchess County Ecological Laboratory; now Vassar Native Plant Preserve

In this class, we will consider the pioneering ecological vision of Edith Roberts (1881-1977), hired in 1919 as Professor of Botany, who introduced forward-looking ideas about what is now known as sustainability to Vassar's classrooms and fields. Roberts was a plant ecologist specializing in the conservation of native plantings, who advocated a 'sense of place' in American landscape. As Chair of Botany, she designed the curriculum around these new ideas. In 1920, she and her students initiated a four-acre garden on campus along the Fonteyn Kill stream dedicated to native plants. Originally called the Dutchess County Botanical Garden, Roberts subsequently renamed it the Dutchess County Ecological Laboratory to reflect her goals. Developed over 30 years, the garden grew to seven acres, comprising over 600 species of plants — nearly all the plants of the county, in their natural environmental associations.

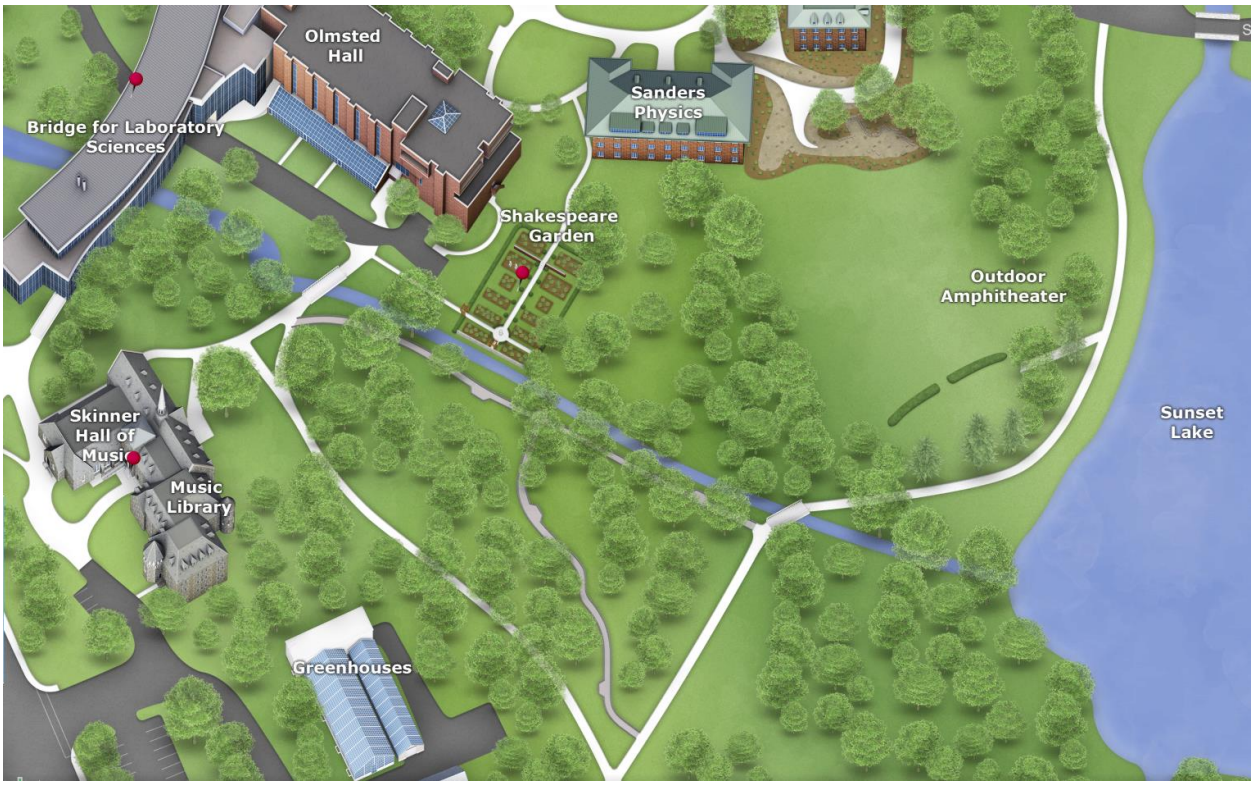
Based on her work in this garden, Roberts wrote a series of 12 articles with Elsa Rehmann (1886–1946) originally published in *House Beautiful*, then gathered in the 1929 volume *American Plants for American Gardens*, an important early manifesto on ecologically-based landscape design. Rehmann, a landscape architect and author who integrated native plantings and ecological concerns into her work, taught landscape gardening in Vassar's Botany department from 1925–27, where she also promoted opportunities for women in the field, and advised students about undergraduate coursework and travel sites to advance their education. The new ideas of Roberts, Rehmann, and contemporaries about plant ecology in relation to natural habitat were supplanting the traditional botanical focus on taxonomy. (Beatrix Farrand was dealing with similar ideas at Yale, when she was hired as Consulting Landscape Gardener to Vassar in 1925; one imagines that Farrand, Roberts, and Rehmann connected at Vassar, although I've found no evidence of it.)

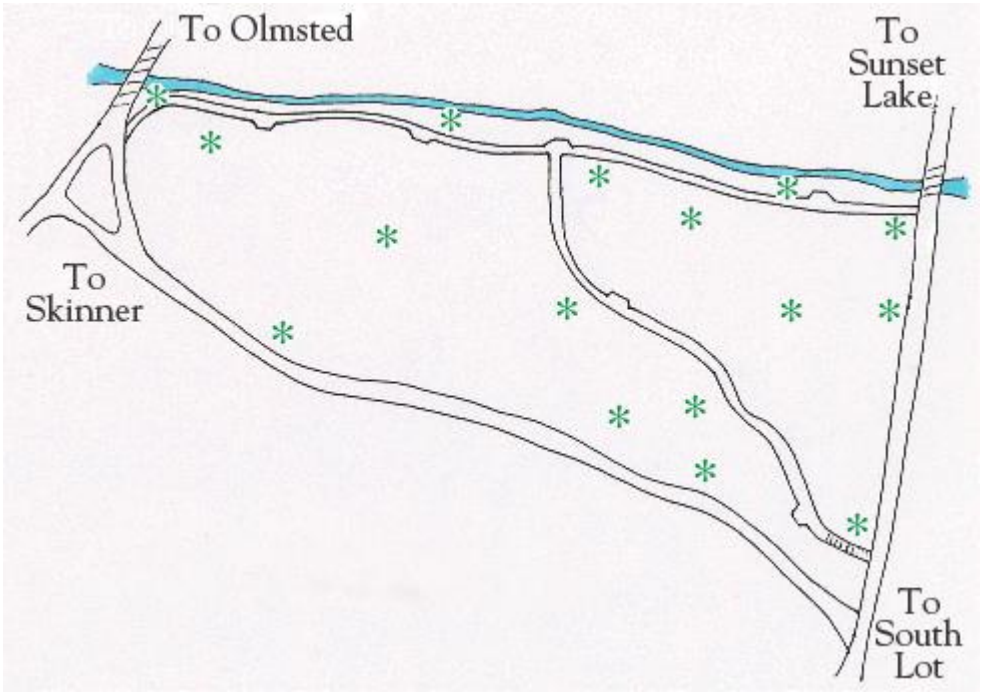


The Ecological Laboratory was stepped on by the construction of Skinner Hall in 1929-31, and again by the Bridge Building in 2011-16. Prof. Ronsheim and her students have worked to save native plants from it; preserve and propagate plants in the remaining section; and clear the area of invasive species, to create what is now called the Vassar Native Plant Preserve, as this New York Times article highlighted.

The Dutchess County Ecological Laboratory, c. 1931, with Skinner Hall in the middle of it

For this itinerary, you will explore this preserve, following the paths below. You might start above Olmsted, by Sanders, and take the path down through the newly recreated Shakespeare Garden. Then, on the walkway between Olmsted and Skinner, follow the Priscilla Bullitt Collins '42 trail, along a boardwalk that winds through a wetland association, along the Fonteyn Kill. Sit for a while on one of the benches and just look and observe. Please come with questions and reflections about what you observe. And photos. Then follow the path above the greenhouses back to Skinner. Stand on the hill behind Skinner and survey the area you have just been in; Prof. Ronsheim will talk to us about the role of this native ecosystem.





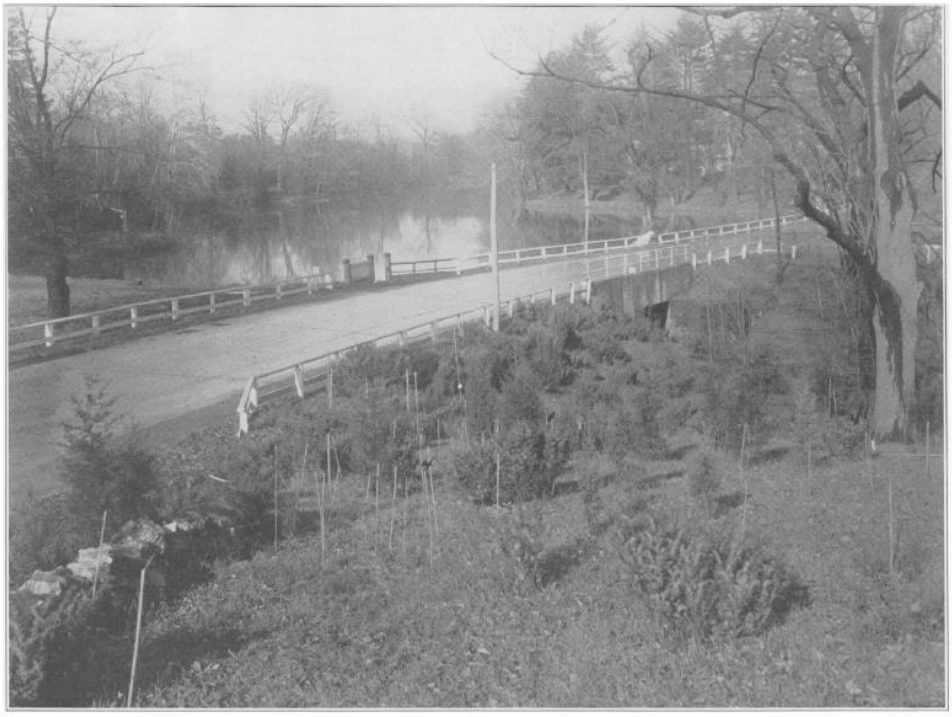


FIG. 12. The beginning of the development of the juniper association in the laboratory in 1925.

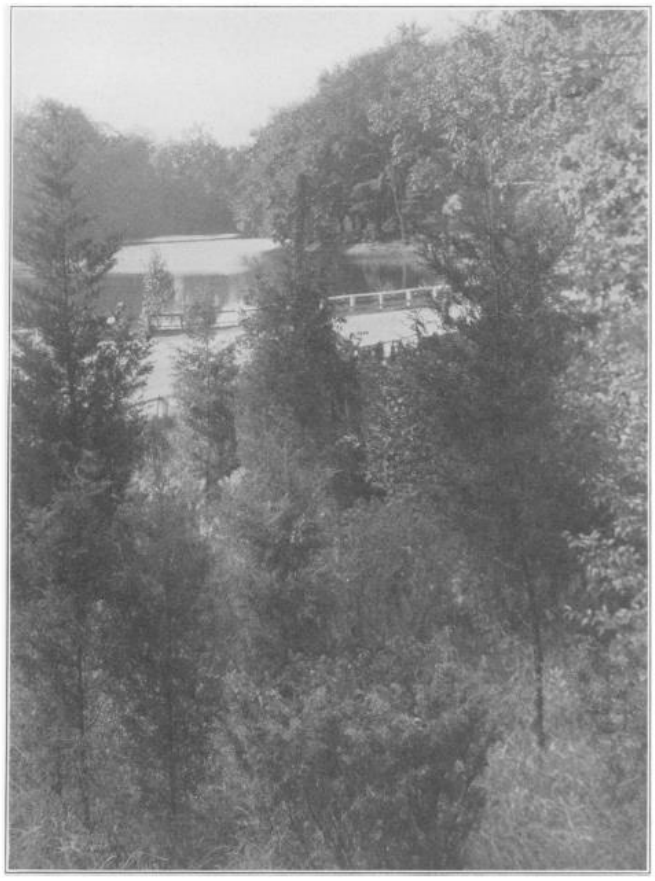


FIG. 13. The juniper association in 1932 from the same point as fig. 12.

TABLE I. *Diagrammatic representation of the plant associations in Dutchess County and their successional relations*

I. Upland Succession

1. Open Field Association
2. Open Field Shrub Association
3. Juniper Association
4. Gray Birch Association
5. Pine Association
6. Xerophytic Oak-Hickory Association
7. Mesophytic Oak-Hickory Association
8. Chestnut Association
9. Beech-Maple-Hemlock Association ← 27. Oak-Hickory Association
17. Oak-Hickory Association ← 26. High Flood Plain Association
(21) 16. Swamp Forest Association ← 25. Low Flood Plain Association
15. Pioneer Swamp Forest Association ← 24. Moist Meadow Association
14. Swamp Shrub Association ← 23. Marginal Association
13. Sedge Association ← 22. Aquatic Association
12. Emergent Aquatic Association
11. Floating Aquatic Association
10. Submerged Aquatic Association

30. Beech-Maple-Hemlock Ravine Association
28. Rock Ravine Association
29. Sand Ravine Association
20. Bog Forest Association
19. Bog Shrub Association
18. Floating Mat Association

D. Ravine Series — B. Bog Series — A. Lake and Pond Series — C. River and Stream Series

II. Lowland Successions

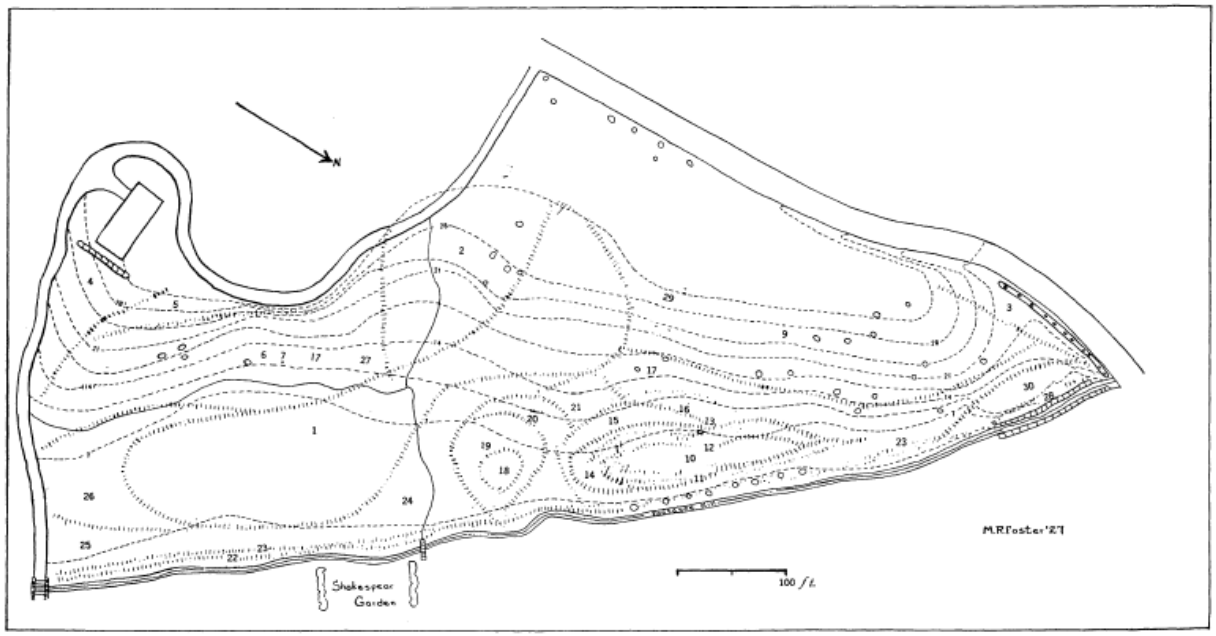


FIG. 2. The Dutchess County Botanical Garden, showing the areas assigned to the thirty associations named in table I. Contour interval 3.5 feet.