

The Season of Renewal

THERE is no record of Richard Nixon ever digging in the earth except for those times that he replaced his divots on the Burning Tree golf course. But there he was last week in the Rose Garden, inhaling the pungent spring earth vapors like an authentic horticulturist and telling Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew all about the White House stand of flowering crab-apple trees.

In fact, Nixon and even more so his wife have been so taken by the crop of glorious blooms on the south spread of the White House that they opened up the grounds last weekend for public tours. The White House has the aura of a Southern plantation, conceived and executed by those country aristocrats George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. And this is the season of renewal in the South, when breathtaking beauty sweeps out the shriveled thoughts of winter.

Even a briefcase specimen like Nixon is affected. He has been seen to slow his determined, nose-toward-the-grindstone stride to the office these mornings in order to take a glance or two through the rising mist at the splendid view across the garden and down the South Lawn. He wanders there with guests when he can search in the rainbows for yet another unfolding flower among the more than 50 specimens.

Virtually every one of the White House residents has been captivated by the acreage. Part of the reason is the feeling of Presidents that they are imprisoned by the office. In any event, they have all insisted upon leaving their green-thumb print.



PAT NIXON IN THE ROSE GARDEN

place on the South Lawn secretes himself in the huge, thick leaves.

There is a mystery: Did Theodore Roosevelt plant the beech out front? Legend says yes. Some White House archivists say no. There is no doubt, however, about the two linden trees that flank the East and West wings. F.D.R. put them in.

When Ike finished his terms, he took the roses out of the Rose Garden and trundled them home to his Gettysburg farm. Kennedy was miffed; he had the whole garden redone so that it would have blooms from spring through fall and a pattern in light and dark in winter. He complained when he found 28 gardeners, insisting that the one man his father hired at Hyannisport could do the job. He found out that the fellow couldn't and settled for kibitzing over the shoulders of the crew that put in the new plantings. Kennedy spent at least \$200,000 in federal funds upgrading the grass, only to see it become as splotchy as any suburban lawn in August. It was replaced.

Lyndon Johnson used to lie down and stretch out in the thick turf just like he was a kid in Texas. He would walk the back lot in the evening with his beagles, looking for squirrels that the dogs could chase. The hand of Lady Bird was all over in thick banks of tulips and marigolds and especially in the graceful old East Garden, which the Johnsons in 1965 renamed the Jacqueline Kennedy Garden. Before the Johnsons left, they put in a couple of oaks that now are reaching for the sky.

So this spring there is a lush lawn of Kentucky-31 fescue instead of the old Merion bluegrass. The magnolias and the cherry trees have sprinkled their delicate petals on the ground like tinted snow. The redbuds, crab trees, azaleas, tulips and hyacinths are at their peak. For the moment anyway, for a President who resides in the center of it all, the world is sweet and beautiful and promising. And it already has the Nixon thumbprint. Right straight out the window, down the knoll and across the drive, as the President's eye goes, there is the *Sequoia gigantea*, which he and Mrs. Nixon planted in 1971. It is four feet high now, up eight inches since that May day. It could reach 100 feet. That may be what the President had in mind.

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Jefferson looked at the even sweep of land out back, and he decided to change its profile to add interest. He ordered up some horse-drawn graders and had two mounds made so that the light could play in the dips and swells. John Quincy Adams came along and planted an American elm right on top of Jefferson's southeast mound. The tree is king now—85 feet tall. It has withstood worms, beetles, the Dutch elm disease and even a great bolt of lightning five years ago, which sheared a heavy branch.

John Kennedy once prowled under the two magnolias planted near the back door by Andrew Jackson. Kennedy liked their cool, damp seclusion so well that he thought it might be an ideal place for a garden house. He never got the project started. Now the Navy air controller who guides the President's helicopters into