

At Old Westbury Gardens, You Can Walk Right Into A Timeless Picture Of Elegance

A \$10 Ticket To Paradise



Westbury House is a Charles II-style mansion that was completed in 1906 by Englishman George A. Crawley for John Shaffer Phipps and his wife, Margarita Grace Phipps. It is the centerpiece of Old Westbury Gardens. (Vince Kish, Vince Kish / October 2, 2009)
By DEBORAH GEIGIS BERRY Special to The Courant

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OLD WESTBURY, N.Y. — - O When Old Westbury Gardens opened to the public 50 years ago, gas was 25 cents a gallon.

Though it's doubtful we'll ever see that price again, a trip to the 200-acre [Long Island](#) showpiece is a deal: The \$10 admission fee entitles visitors to spend the day on an

exquisite estate whose lush grounds, with thousands of blossoms and 100 tree species, provide a recession-era respite just 25 miles east of [Times Square](#).

Unlike the Newport mansions, strung like showy gems along Bellevue Avenue, Old Westbury Gardens is a hidden treasure, nestled between the [Long Island Expressway](#) and the Jericho Turnpike on Long Island's north shore. European linden and beech allées seem to stretch forever. The 2.5-acre walled garden harbors a lily pond and brilliant blooms. The gold-trimmed, wrought-iron gates outside the Charles II-style mansion, Westbury House, recall those at [British](#) palaces. But the only royalty anywhere near the place is the borough of Queens.

"A tremendous amount of work goes into keeping up Old Westbury," says communications manager Vincent Kish. "It takes two gardeners at least two weeks to trim the hemlock borders that stretch from the south lawn to the south gate."

An easy day trip from Connecticut, Old Westbury Gardens is the centerpiece of a visit along Long Island's north shore, replete with waterfront villages, cafes and chocolate shops, museums, roadside wonders (the St. James General Store was built in 1857) and grand mansions. Parts of the [Gold Coast](#), as it is known, evoke the wealth and privilege depicted in [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#)'s 1925 novel "The Great Gatsby." Although every mansion open to the public has something to recommend it, Old Westbury Gardens is the region's crown jewel.

"We have a beautiful mansion — there are lots of other nice mansions," says Kish. We have great gardens — there are other gardens. And we have many public events, as do other properties. Having all three of these things is really special."

Though blooms and visitations peak in summer, autumn is an ideal time to visit. Jewel-toned blooms and leaves color the extensive grounds. The many special events include a scarecrow exhibit (which runs to Nov. 1), a bat walk (observe the winged creatures on Oct. 23) and a dog celebration (Nov. 24 and 25).

In a tough economy, Old Westbury Gardens is a balm. Visitors can walk in the steps of the privileged without shelling out for gardeners, butlers and housekeeping staff. Painters are welcome; a favorite spot to set up an easel is near the Temple of Love, a classic-columned pavilion by a painterly pond.

Westbury House looks as if it could have been built hundreds of years ago, and that is the intended effect. But the mansion was completed in 1906 by Englishman George A. Crawley for John Shaffer Phipps and his wife, Margarita Grace Phipps.

As the story goes, John promised Margarita, a member of the Grace Shipping family who fancied living in England, that if she moved to [New York](#), he would build her an English country estate. He did just that, though Westbury House's plants and trees were selected for their suitability to Long Island's climate.

Inside the 44-room mansion, the Phippses favored modern touches. Westbury House had a telephone, and windows on the west porch could be lowered hydraulically. On tours, visitors can see the very antiques and design elements that graced the mansion in the early 20th century. Among the treasures: a John Singer Sargent portrait of Mrs. Henry Phipps and her grandson, Winston Guest; ornate over-door carvings; the family's extensive furnishings; hand-painted wallpaper; and a Frome needlepoint carpet, circa 1765.

John and Margarita's children also lived in style. Their boys played in custom-built log cabins. For her 10th birthday, daughter Peggie received an English thatched-roof cottage, where she hosted children's parties. Situated by the Primrose Path, the cottage still contains Peggie's dolls and tea set. As an adult, Peggie Phipps Boegner (who died at age 99 in 2006) founded Old Westbury Gardens in 1959 as a nonprofit enterprise and frequently hosted dignitaries and movie stars at the estate.

As one explores the grounds, there is a sense of déjà vu — for good reason. Hollywood adores Old Westbury Gardens. Portions of the 1959 Hitchcock film "North by Northwest," "Love Story" (1970), "The Age of Innocence" (1993) and "American Gangster" (2007) were shot here.

The estate appeared on the television programs "[Sex and the City](#)" and "Gossip Girl." And the mansion and grounds are prominently featured in the 2007 [HBO](#) film "Bernard and Doris," which chronicles the friendship between heiress Doris Duke (played by [Susan Sarandon](#)) and her Irish butler Bernard Lafferty ([Ralph Fiennes](#)).

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Other Mansions Worth Visiting On Long Island

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>> [Nassau County Museum of Art](#): Situated on the former Frick Estate, the 145-acre site features outdoor sculpture, formal gardens and a mansion housing European and American art from the 19th century to the present. Combined admission to the Arnold & Joan Saltzman Fine Art Building and the Mini Art Museum for Children is \$10 for adults, \$8 for visitors 62 and older, \$4 for students (ID required) and \$4 for children ages 4 to 12. Information: 1 Museum Drive, Roslyn Harbor, N.Y.; 516-484-9337; www.nassaumuseum.com.

>> *Planting Fields Arboretum*: Tour a 65-room Tudor Revival mansion, Coe Hall, and explore the extensive grounds — 409 acres of formal gardens, woodland paths and rolling lawns. Parking fee, \$6; self-guided tours of the mansion's first floor cost \$5 for

guests 12 and older. Information: 1395 Planting Fields Road, Oyster Bay, N.Y.; 516-922-9200; www.plantingfields.org.

>> [*Sagamore Hill National Historic Site*](#): [Long Island](#)'s only presidential site is the 23-room Victorian mansion built by President [Theodore Roosevelt](#). Between 1902 and 1908, the property was the president's Summer [White House](#). Tours cost \$5, free for ages 15 and younger. Information: [Cove Neck](#) Road, Oyster Bay, N.Y.; 516-922-4447; www.nps.gov/sahi.

>> [*Vanderbilt Museum and Planetarium*](#): The former estate of William Kissam Vanderbilt II features a 238-seat planetarium and a Spanish-Mediterranean mansion overlooking [Long Island Sound](#). General admission is \$7, \$6 for students (ID required) and guests 62 and older, \$3 for guests under 12. Guided mansion tours and planetarium shows cost extra. Information: 180 [Little Neck](#) Road, Centerport, N.Y.; 631-854-5555; www.vanderbiltmuseum.org.

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A Suggested Day Trip On Long Island's North Shore



The south porch walkway at Westbury House at Old Westbury Gardens is shrouded in fog (Vince Kish / October 2, 2009)

By Deborah Geigis Berry Special To The Hartford Courant

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Before your trip, consult the [Long Island](http://www.discoverlongisland.com) Convention and Visitors Bureau (877-FUN-ON-LI or www.discoverlongisland.com). The organization's website offers coupons for discounts on area attractions.

Early Morning

If you don't want to drive directly to Old Westbury Gardens (directions at www.oldwestburygardens.org), consider taking your car aboard the Port Jefferson Ferry, driving to the destinations listed below, and taking the ferry home at day's end. It's a pricey option, but ferrying gives you 2 1/2 hours to enjoy water views instead of sitting in traffic.

Several times daily, the ferry sails between Bridgeport and Port Jefferson, N.Y. A one-way trip lasts 75 minutes. Reservations for automobiles are required (888-443-3779; www.bpjferry.com). The one-way rate for a car and driver is \$51; additional passengers over age 12 are \$14.75.

Mid-Morning

From Port Jefferson, drive to the St. James General Store (Deepwells Farm County Park, St. James; 631-854-3740), the country's oldest, continuously operating general store. You'll find old-fashioned candy, pottery, jewelry, books, maps and such curiosities as powdered ink.

Lunchtime

Visit Old Westbury Gardens (71 Old Westbury Road, Old Westbury, N.Y.; 516-333-0048; www.oldwestburygardens.org). Admission is \$10; visitors over 62 pay \$8; children ages 7 to 12 are \$5; free for 6 and under. Though Oct. 31, the property is open daily (except Tuesday) from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Vehicles cannot enter the property after 4 p.m. Hours are limited in November and December; from Dec. 21 to April, the gardens are closed.

Enjoy a picnic lunch at Old Westbury, or dine at a nearby restaurant. Mim's (235 Roslyn Road, Roslyn Heights; 516-625-7305), about 2 1/2 miles from the estate, offers Tuscan-grilled Vegetable Salad, Rigatoni Pink Carbonara, Sushi Rice Crusted Salmon and thin-crust Margherita Pizza. Lunches start at about \$10.

Late Afternoon

Explore boutique-filled seaside villages, including Oyster Bay, Cold Spring Harbor and Northport.

Walk on the boardwalk by [Long Island Sound](#) at [Sunken Meadow State Park](#) in Kings Park (631-269-4333). Free admission.

Dinnertime

Get takeout for the ride home on the ferry. Tiger Lily Café (156 E. Main St. Port Jefferson, N.Y.; 631-476-7080; www.tigerlilycafe.com), offers vegetarian and meat-filled sandwiches, wraps and salads starting at \$8.

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