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They Paved Paradise? A Closer Look at Trump's New White House Rose Garden

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August 3, 2025



The newly repaved Rose Garden of the White House on Friday, August 1. Photo: Getty Images



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In the spring of 1963, toddler John F. Kennedy Jr. was photographed in a powder-blue suit wandering the freshly mulched paths of the White House Rose Garden. Dwarfed by clipped hedges and tulips flashing red and yellow, he stood just beyond a pristine green lawn—its first spring since the garden’s sweeping redesign the year prior by Rachel “Bunny” Mellon, the patrician horticulturist charged with bringing order and poetry to the presidential grounds.

Commissioned by President Kennedy and guided by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, Mellon’s garden became a living emblem of the Camelot era, as fleeting as it was idyllic. Which is why, decades later, newly released images of that same lawn—now paved over

with pale stone by President Trump—have left White House nostalgists and gardeners alike wondering: Why trade greenery for granite?



John F. Kennedy, Jr. in the Rose Garden, April 26, 1963. Photo: Courtesy of the JFK Library

But the Rose Garden was never meant to be a static relic. Its defining layout—still largely recognizable six decades later—was tailored not only for beauty, but for utility. “My

grandmother was always open to treating gardens with the idea that you had to pull a tree out when it was too old, or you had to update a design element if it didn't make sense anymore,” says Thomas Lloyd, Mellon’s grandson, board member and President of the Gerard B. Lambert Foundation, and co-author of *Garden Secrets of Bunny Mellon* and *Bunny Mellon Style*. “Mr. Kennedy knew the advent of television was a huge new technology and a component of his success as a politician,” he continues. “He wanted to have an outdoor area to do press conferences and really utilize that space in a very beautiful way.”

To that end, Mellon—introduced to JFK by Jacqueline Kennedy—transformed what had once been a loosely structured garden first planted in 1913 by Ellen Wilson. She widened the central step leading from the lawn to the Oval Office into a low platform, creating an outdoor pulpit for presidential addresses. Carefully plotted hedges in diamond formation softened the classical lines of the White House. Crabapple trees added seasonal drama. The grassy expanse was left uninterrupted, spacious enough to stage televised diplomacy and stateside pageantry.



Flowers in full bloom in the White House Rose Garden on April 27, 1963. Photo: Getty Images

“The president proposed to her: make a plan for this garden space where I can have a beautiful place to give a press conference,” Lloyd explains. “That was her job. It wasn't, ‘Hey, make me a beautiful rose garden that looks like your garden at Oak Spring in Upperville.’ It was all about JFK’s direction.”

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So, under what direction are today's White House gardeners operating? A space that's party-proof, Mar-a-Lago-inspired, and—according to Trump himself—less treacherous for high-heeled women.

“Well, what's happening is... that's supposed to have events. Every event you have, it's soaking wet, and the women with the high heels—it's just too much,” Trump told *Fox's* Laura Ingraham during a March White House tour. The roses, he clarified, would stay. The grass? Gone. In its place: “Gorgeous stone.”

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Aside from these anecdotes, the White House has offered no formal press release or public briefing on the Rose Garden renovations. Instead, the window into the transformation has come via photo wires, which have documented the garden's gradual—and often curious—metamorphosis. On June 11, a bulldozer appeared on the lawn. By June 21, gravel had been poured into deep trenches. A week later, on July 15, the garden was a scene of blue tarps, makeshift umbrellas, and orange-vested workers hauling what appeared to be concrete slabs. By July 23, the lawn had vanished entirely, replaced by stone tiles laid in a diamond pattern.

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The redesign, overseen by the National Park Service and funded by the Trust for the National Mall, is said to reimagine the garden in the image of Trump's favored patio at Mar-a-Lago—where, per *The New York Times*, the former president “spends hours of his evenings... holding an iPad, controlling the playlist and blasting Luciano Pavarotti and James Brown at earsplitting volumes.”

Over the decades, the lawn has borne witness to history, both monumental and intimate. It's where Tricia Nixon was married on a sunny June afternoon in 1971. And in 1994, Hussein I of Jordan shook hands with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to signal peace between Israel and Jordan, as brokered by Bill Clinton.

Each administration has left its mark, though mostly with a light hand. Reagan swapped roses. George H.W. Bush added paving for accessibility. The Obamas installed a kitchen garden nearby. And in 2020, First Lady Melania Trump oversaw a significant redesign—replacing the colorful cherry trees and tulip beds with a more muted, symmetrical layout that, supporters argued, brought the garden closer to Mellon’s original vision. Critics, meanwhile, lamented the bleached effect.

But this year’s transformation? It marks the most dramatic departure yet. In short: they paved paradise and put up a patio. The newly tiled Rose Garden is just one of many sweeping aesthetic changes Trump has made to align the White House with his signature taste—an opulent blend of Mar-a-Lago grandeur and Trump Tower gloss. Out went the restrained décor of previous administrations; in came gilt cherubs, Rococo mirrors, and medallions gleaming with theatrical flair. He’s even embraced a salon-style approach to hanging portraits, layering walls with bold imagery—including the framed *New York Post* cover of his own mugshot on proud display. “We handle it with great love,” Trump told Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney during a March visit, “and 24-karat gold. That always helps, too.”

Gardens, of course, are not meant to remain unchanged. They grow and recede, are pruned and replanted with each passing season. But in the ever-evolving White House, few changes strike as deeply as those made to the Rose Garden. For those who know its story—who understand the quiet symbolism behind each hedgerow and crabapple tree—the meaning endures. “This Rose Garden project that [my grandmother and Jackie] did together... it’s a wonderful legacy for my family,” Lloyd reflects. “And it will always be a wonderful legacy.”

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