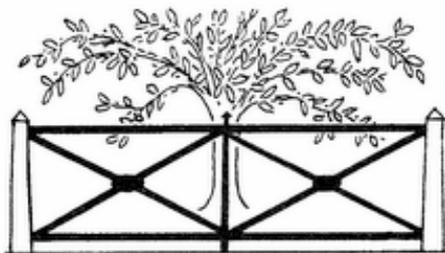


An Inside Look at
The Garden Club of New Haven:
A Short History



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In 1924, the Garden Club of New Haven held its first meeting. Just months before, several New Haven women had taken a drive out to “Woodbridge and other surrounding towns to admire the gardens and trees of the countryside.” As they drove, these friends talked about the importance of natural beauty and about their interest in gardening and whether that interest could be shared with others in New Haven. They decided it could. They began to organize a club which would allow them to further develop their love of gardening and to do more active gardening within the city. They also hoped to promote civic, hospital and conservation work in New Haven in an organized way. And, they wondered if they would be able to bring together enough friends to form a Garden Club which would serve these goals. Within months, these few had gathered fifty other interested women. They met at the New Haven Country Club for the first meeting of what would become the Garden Club of New Haven.

Very quickly, plans were developed and underway to highlight the Club and to introduce it to the City of New Haven. By 1925, planning began for the Club’s first flower show, an event that would become a feature of the Club. Handwritten notes describe

members' thoughts on lighting, floor plan and even "how [to] fasten fire places to the wall." The first Garden Club of New Haven Flower Show, held June 23, 1925 at the Public Library, was such a success that it was quickly followed by the first Tulip Show in 1926. At that show, members were lauded for successfully showcasing tulips, and they described this second show as a "thrilling experiment in every way." But, the cost for the "experiment" was high. Twenty-three dollars and thirty-nine cents was a not insignificant sum for this young Club.

Though tulip shows were infrequent in the years following, except for the years of the Second World War, flower shows became annual events. Despite – or perhaps because of – the United States Depression, attendance at flower shows during the 1930s was high. The Flower Show of 1931, for example, welcomed well over a thousand visitors.

The Flower Show of 1933 saw the show, now described as the Flower Exhibit, ambitiously extended to two days. But, spring was hot that year and the exhibits displayed on the first day drooped and wilted. On the morning of the second day, resourceful members "set their alarms to rise early" and replaced all of the damaged flowers with "literally bushels of flowers" freshly cut from their own gardens.

Planning and arranging Flower Shows had become for the New Haven club and clubs around the country a central focus of garden club life. But connection between clubs and the advantages of alliances had taken on importance, too. The Garden Club of America had incorporated in 1913, but was limited to its twelve founding Clubs at this time. So, in 1927, the Garden Club of New

Haven led the way in forming what was then called the State Federation of Garden Clubs, now The Federated Garden Clubs of Connecticut. The Club has remained a leader in Federated and was welcomed into the Garden Club of America in 1952.

Civic activity was important in the early years of the Club most visibly with the planting of dogwoods on the Boulevard when the Public Works Administration and the New Haven Road Construction Company opened the Boulevard in 1934. In 1935, work was begun in Pardee Garden with the planting of roses. One hundred-fifty roses had been given to the City of New Haven by a Texas rose grower and the city quickly passed them to the Garden Club. These women of indomitable determination accepted the roses gladly and so began the Pardee Rose Garden.

The effects of the War years, which individuals and organizations all over the country would eventually experience, were felt in the beginning only slowly. In early 1940, life still seemed predictable. The Club had become incorporated and its visibility in the local newspaper, the *New Haven Register*, was rapidly increasing. The *Register*, in May of that year, focused on the Club's work to remove billboards throughout Connecticut and applauded the Club's contributions to "conservation, education and a more beautiful New Haven." And, in March of 1940, the Club, perhaps feeling the isolation created by the vast ocean to its east, voted down contributions to the Finnish War Relief Fund. By November of 1940, much had changed. Blackouts were occurring nightly and life was now almost fully focused on the War. The Club voted to establish a War Relief Committee and all members were asked to participate. Once a week, they met to do "war work" which included "making garments" to be sent overseas.

In 1941, the Garden Club began to participate, as well, in Red Cross meetings and would maintain that participation throughout the War. Concomitant with the War effort were efforts to continue developing the Club, and members began exploring the advantages of joining the Garden Club of America, which they would do several years later.

Flower arranging and horticulture during these years of the War were pursued but the focus had shifted. Members now planned activities which directly and immediately impacted the community. Arrangements were delivered weekly to New Haven Hospital (now Yale New Haven Hospital) and horticulture and civic work began to focus on Victory Gardens. By 1942, vegetables, rather than flowers, were being planted and the schedule of talks on arrangements was “given up” in favor of lectures on “Defense Gardens.” Members were regularly asked to donate blood, and did. The business of nominating slates, as well as other procedural club business, was continued but “all art projects were suspended for the duration of the War.” Members focused on making usable gifts to be given to servicemen, on visiting hospitals and, most especially, on using gardens “therapeutically.” The Garden Committee was now known as the War Garden Committee and its focus was to teach and work with school children to grow vegetables, the seeds of which the Club sent to Britain.

In autumn of 1943, the Club held a Harvest Show. The price of admission? A War Stamp. This show, called the “Victory Garden Show,” now showcased fruits and vegetables, with only a few flowers featured, and members and visitors to the show were asked to send whatever they could spare from their own gardens to the

Military hospital. The show was a success but, in the months following, enthusiasm in the Club began to wane. As the War continued, women everywhere became more focused on the war effort at home. Requests for attendance at meetings were sent out to members and requirements for membership were softened. For those women who did attend meetings, discussions included a nod toward maintaining Club activities but the strong focus was on the Club's involvement in War work. In an effort to make the Club activities meaningful, a shift was emphasized toward the benefits of flower arranging as a therapeutic activity. Rather than spending much time arranging flowers, a method for flower arranging that could be done in "minutes" was taught, with the goal of brightening a house or a bedside. Meanwhile, the War Gardens Committee began to research and report on "edible weeds" which could help to address the continued food shortages. And, in the spring of 1944, members decided to open their gardens to men and women in the military as another welcome form of therapy.

The Club's twentieth anniversary was also celebrated that spring. Members shared a small birthday cake to commemorate. At the end of the year, the tradition of bringing a bit of cheer during the holidays began when members gave stockings to disabled veterans at Christmas. Throughout that year, focus on children dramatically increased as the Club created the Junior Garden Club of New Haven for girls aged 11-14 years. Together, women and girls worked to beautify the Boulevard and anyone who could "spare the gas" was asked to drive out to see the plantings these girls had placed. Additionally, members gave birdsong recordings to soldiers who had been blinded. The Conservation Committee focused on "buckling down," and strongly recommended to mem-

bers that they “think about consuming our natural resources” not just during war, but afterward, as well. Their foresight is striking.

And, then, the War was over. Club minutes do not record the end, and, in the autumn of 1945, most activities involved continued conservation efforts to deal with scarcities. The first acknowledgement that the War was over and peace had come occurred in January of 1946 when the Club received an award for member volunteerism from the New Haven Hospital for work during the War. Garden Club members had significantly contributed to the war effort throughout the city and they were gratefully recognized by the hospital.

As people looked to a peaceful future, life gradually returned to a normal rhythm and members who had withdrawn from the Club during the War began to request reinstatement. Although a request to fund flowers for soldiers at a dance at the Country Club was voted down, the Club donated money to the Hospital Fund. “With the War over,” members voted that, henceforth, resources be devoted to work more closely related to the Garden Club. And, quite suddenly, members’ horizons expanded south, perhaps to lands less affected by war. Speakers’ talks that year included topics on the horticulture of South America and Mexico. Flower arranging for its sheer beauty and precision led to the formation of study groups and the garden design of flowers was once again emphasized. And, plans were initiated to replace trees in New Haven.

Membership requirements tightened, unexcused absences resulted in lost membership and all members were required to exhibit at the upcoming flower show or face suspension! On May 21,

1947, the first Flower Show following the War was held and it was a great success. Another was held in May, 1948 and a third in May, 1949. A tradition had been re-established.

Whereas members had previously sent to Europe the war relief seeds grown through the War Garden Committee's work with schools and with Junior Gardeners, now in an effort to help Western Europe recover, members sent "Seeds of Peace." Federated led the way. As well, the commitment of the Club to the Red Cross and Junior Gardeners would continue for another few years.

During the late 1940s, Club enthusiasm – and options – returned. As well as restoring the tradition of annual flower shows, the Club re-involved itself in political issues related to conservation. The first was a write-in campaign to support a Soil Conservation Bill before the House in Hartford; the second was the return of the Billboard Committee. The Civic committee re-focused its attention on the possibility of developing what was then called the "Whitney Avenue Triangle," now Phelps Triangle; members actively worked with teachers and children to demonstrate the importance of soil; and the hospital was a regular recipient of both plants and arrangements. But, the Club was running a deficit.

The Board decided to address both its finances and what had been, during the war years, its declining membership and by the 25th anniversary of the Club in 1949, the Club's Board surprised membership with the good news. A financial surplus had been achieved, numbers had increased and "the biggest surprise of all" – the Board announced to the membership its "acquisition of a silver tea service to be owned by the Club. And, the Interna-

tional Silver Camille pattern became a part of the Garden Club tradition.”

The Board strongly suggested, however, that the Club should establish a new tradition, as well. Going forward, at each flower show, the Board recommended the Club hold a sale of some gardening related item. “Color Charts” were the first venture into this pecuniary pursuit. The Club had developed its Color Chart during the late 1920s and the Chart was helpfully revived after the War. While later Club members may balk at the constrictions posed by a “color chart,” earlier members used them . . . and sold them.

Throughout the 1950s, the Garden Club continued to hold annual shows and, included in its schedule of shows, was the International Garden Show. This massive show was supported by both the Federated Clubs and Garden Club of America. The theme of “outdoor living staged within a walled garden in the theme of ‘Little Old New York’” was held in the old Coliseum in downtown New Haven.

Much work was done in the 1950s on the Green, in East Rock Park and on the mall at Edgewood and the *New Haven Register* was, once again, paying attention to the changes. The *Register* wrote of the Club’s “cultural contributions in seeking a proper balance of nature, soil conservation and park management” and a speaker from Yale’s Graduate Program in City Planning told members that their “contributions far surpassed jazz, the Southern novel and the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright”!

As the 1960s opened, the Garden Club was fully committed to the early goals of flower shows, conservation and education

through a speakers series and workshops. But Elm trees informed the agenda. The corner of Church and Chapel Streets saw the planting of six majestic elms as the Club dedicated itself to reviving that corner of the Green which had given New Haven its post Civil War nickname, “the Elm City.” Though in the 19th Century, the Green had been populated with elms, by 1910, many of them had been removed and the Garden Club sought to address that.

Mid-decade saw the development of a strong political movement to prevent destruction of parks as highway development threatened to take open land for road development. Once again, the Garden Club of New Haven’s Conservation committee was active in the “Open Space Program.”

As well, the Club of 1965 determined to showcase the cultural heritage of New Haven by hosting a walking tour of the Hillhouse Avenue houses preceded by a lunch at the New Haven Lawn Club. The *New Haven Register* publicized this effort and Club archival photographs convey the beauty of the homes enhanced by the beauty of arrangements created by Club members.

But, these were also new times for the country and for New Haven. In a 1967 article about the environment, the *Register* proclaimed, “It’s OK to Breathe, Just Don’t Inhale.” And, the environment and other issues of the late 1960s took center stage for the Club, as well. In May, the Club was asked to share in a project with the Redevelopment Agency of the City of New Haven which the *Register* described as the development of “gardening with social significance.” The Civic committee exemplified what the *Register* described as an “established practice of the Club which works diligently for the betterment of the community.” Work on

the Hill, in Phelps Triangle, at City Hall and even the distribution of daffodils and tulips were cited as examples of the work contributing to the beautification of the city. As hoped, people saw the effects in their lives and the *Register* wrote “several neighbors [in the Hill Project] have been busy painting and sprucing up their homes and fences” in an expression of civic pride which was stimulated by the work of the Garden Club.

The project of Beautification continued and in 1969, the *Register* again reported that lawns had been re-seeded, bulbs had bloomed and civic pride was flourishing.

While the Civic Committee was beautifying the city, the “Art of Botanical Illustration and the Tour of the Master’s House” on Hillhouse was also recurring, but with a twist. Lunch was no longer held at the New Haven Lawn Club. Instead, as the *Yale Daily News* reported, more casual “box lunches” were offered before the tour and they were a bit light – “‘four bites and the food is gone’, complained one member.” So, what saved the day on this tour? According to the *Daily News*, an anonymous gift of sherry to the visitors on the tour “fortified them and sent the women back for an afternoon on the trail.” Prominently displayed in the Club’s archives is the 1968 photograph of the “Sherry Table,” a gift to the Garden Club from an unknown friend.

As the decade closed, other photographs vividly highlight the beautiful arrangements found on the tours of the Masters’ Houses. But, in 1970, the scenes in these photographs juxtapose stunning, formal arrangements with the young visitors to the show, sporting long hair, jeans and t-shirts. This was the cultural change to which the Club would now respond and there seemed to be an

ease with which they adjusted. With a calming, accepting and democratic air, members entitled this year's flower show "Flowers in the Public Eye – Give Pleasure in Many Ways." And, they did. Their young visitors are happily – and comfortably – seen enjoying the show.

The 1970s saw the foundational work for many of the Club's current Civic projects. The Phelps Triangle was dedicated as a mini-park in New Haven, the Flag Court at Fort Nathan Hale Restoration was planted and West Rock Nature Center was naturalized.

By the 1980s, the treasury had increased and the Club was now able to grant money to fund special projects, including \$1,000 to Schooner to teach children about the marine environment. As well, Project Trees was organized and in 1984, fifty-one Elms were planted in the city. The Club had come a very long way since the 1940s when it ran a deficit. In 1986, through a concentrated fund-raising effort, Club members raised \$100,000 to plant twenty-five elms, nineteen dogwood and two specimen trees on the New Haven Green and to maintain and support future plantings on the Green and throughout the city.

Project Trees, the fourth wave of planting on the Green, significantly increased the tree canopy in the city. Prior to the Club's work in the 1980s, the *New York Times* wrote that "for many decades the Elm City title has been a hollow one." Then, and now, the Club has sought to address that.

Flower Arranging and Civic work continued through the 1990s, but membership was aging and some members feared the worst – that the Club would not be able to sustain itself. Happily,

during the first ten years of the new millennium, that trend has been reversed. Energy and enthusiasm now infuse the Club and Horticulture, Conservation and Civic committees are all actively involved in various projects.

Several themes emerge from the Club's history. A long and deep experience with Horticulture is present in members of every era. The Visiting Gardens program has shifted and brought joy in numerous ways, both in peacetime and in war. Since that first drive out of New Haven to visit "out of town" gardens, members have opened their gardens to fellow members, visitors and the military. The tremendous talent in both flower arranging and presentation and in the organization of flower shows has been evident each year in the shows. As it has been since the beginning of the Club, the Conservation committee is actively involved in numerous political issues and has been effective in influencing and changing political direction. Just as much of the cultural heritage of our city was showcased and highlighted in the tours of Hillhouse homes in the 1960s, the 2011 Garden Club of America Zone II Meeting, celebrated in New Haven and chaired by the Club's past president, Carol Ross, harked back to that cultural heritage as GCA guests were invited to tour the buildings and parks of Yale University and New Haven.

And, Civic is building on that fourth wave of elm tree planting of the 1980s on the New Haven Green, a legacy the Club inherited and has since maintained. As well, the thread of therapeutic and educational work with children was serendipitously picked up when the daughter of one of the members who was developing the 2013 Tree Project suggested involving children

of New Haven in the growing and re-planting of elm trees especially in areas where an increase of the tree canopy will be beneficial to them. For young and old alike, the 2013 Tree Project, now embraced by the Club as a whole, will bring benefits and enable residents and visitors to reconnect to New Haven as the Elm City. If the Club is successful in stimulating a renewed sense of stewardship and history among New Haven residents and visitors, especially among the children of New Haven, the Garden Club of New Haven of 2013 will have carried forward the legacy of our predecessors in elevating the historical importance of the American Elm, renewing New Haven with a canopy of elms and educating and reconnecting the community with its identity as the Elm City.

Looking toward the future, the Club will continue to innovate and to build upon its past. At the first meeting of the new season, in October, 2012, four long-time members of the Club participated in a panel conversation about the Garden Club of New Haven. Their experiences epitomized the life of the Club and the ways in which the Club has changed and responded to the times, whether in war or peace or social turmoil or prosperity. Each of these members was asked a few questions about their memories of the Club and the legacy they would like to see in the future. Some of their fondest memories are of the Christmas arrangements handmade and delivered by Club members to hospitals and nursing homes in New Haven, a practice which has become a Garden Club tradition; the wonderful floral arranging created by members; the stimulating speakers at meetings; and the trip to the Chelsea Flower Show – yes, that Chelsea Flower Show! To a woman, they remembered activities involving beautifying the city at Phelps

Triangle, horticulture at Long Wharf Preserve and work with the inner city. And, several of them also spoke of the reinvigoration of the Club over the last ten years and thought that the Club has developed dramatically in floral arranging and in participation in shows, in the preservation of our natural resources, and in civic involvement such as the Club's focus on the inner city as exemplified by the seminal work on the 2013 Tree Project. Civic, Horticulture and Conservation are the three touchstones of our mission and these memories of the oldest of our members can be guideposts for us as we near our Centennial and go forward in this 21st Century.



*All quotations not otherwise attributed are taken directly from Minutes of the Garden Club of New Haven for those dates.



NOTES

