



Beltsville Garden Club

by Sandra A. Lange



Club History

The Beltsville Garden Club — now in its 56th year — is one of the oldest in the Washington area. Some of its 200 members are professional horticulturists; most are passionate gardeners.

The club was organized in 1952 by 14 men who lived or worked in Beltsville, MD. Most were scientists working in research labs at the University of Maryland and U. S. Department of Agriculture. One early club president was George M. Darrow, who became the foremost authority on strawberries for much of his 46 year-career at USDA. Other founding or early members include Donald Scott, who was a renowned USDA researcher who also bred strawberries and blueberries to improve their commercial qualities, and Robert Stewart, who was a world-class geneticist credited with revolutionizing the poinsettia industry with his discoveries on color and lasting characteristics that led to their becoming the number one plant seller in the nursery industry.

During the club's early years, the membership roster was dominated by men, stated 40-year member and retired USDA entomologist Bill Nickle. "Women members only did flower arranging — no dirt," he commented seriously.

Nickle believes that the club's strength derives from the expertise of

its members, some of whom are "real gardeners" in their professional lives. "If anyone asks a gardening question at a club meeting, there is sure to be an expert plant person to answer it," he asserts. Nickle remembers when the club operated an extensive lending library of classic gardening books which was wheeled out at each monthly meeting. Eventually, the books were donated to the Beltsville Public Library.

Good Deeds and Works

In 1994, the club entered into a partnership with the Duckworth School, taking over the operation of a fully-equipped greenhouse. This Prince George's County school serves students with moderate to severe disabilities, ages 5 to 21. Proceeds from the sale of plants grown in the greenhouse are given to the school.

The greenhouse is situated in a courtyard at the center of the school. The club redeveloped this space, planting trees and shrubs to attract wildlife, mainly birds because of its isolation, but squirrels have discovered a route to the school roof and down to the bird feeders. Other landscaping projects near the school include a planting of six maple trees in a new playground. Club members also planted native woodland plants along a nature walk in the woods adjacent to the faculty parking lot.

The club established a scholarship program at the University of Maryland. Member donations support students in the horticultural sciences. In past years, the club partnered with the Beltsville Citizens Association to promote the

planting of street trees. It participated in a highway clean-up program for a number of years and now is committed to the periodic cleanup of the nature trail around the school.

Upcoming Events

Gardeners from Prince George's and Montgomery Counties are drawn to the club's monthly membership meetings held on the fourth Wednesday evening of each month, September to May, at the James E. Duckworth School in Beltsville. Guest speakers are often scientists who present topics related to their research. After the talk, names are drawn for door prizes. Each club member usually brings a plant for the door prize drawing. Nearly everyone leaves the meeting with a treasure or two for their own garden.

Special club highlights each year are the two annual spring plant sales traditionally held in early April and the Saturday before Mothers' Day in May. Club members sell annuals, perennials, houseplants, and woody shrubs in the parking lot of High Point High School. Hundreds of people arrive before the 8:00AM start, some with their own garden carts, to haul away their purchases.

In August, the club sponsors an annual Peach Festival. The first Peach Festivals in the 1960s were lavish affairs where members showed off their canned goods and handicrafts, conducted plant clinics and demonstrated flower arranging. Nickle remembers when Albert Behnke, founder of Behnke Nurseries, hosted several Peach Festivals. Behnke gave tours of his own garden, proudly displaying his roses and three-pound Belgium tomatoes.

Peach Festivals now are more casual. Families contribute a pot luck dish to share, and the club serves vanilla ice cream made at the University of Maryland's dairy topped with freshly sliced peaches. The club also sponsors a holiday pot luck dinner in December and trips to arboretums in the spring.

Today, the club adheres to its original mission to promote the gardening interests of its members and to increase their knowledge of horticulture through regular meetings and occasional field trips. Information on all the activities can be found on at the club's web site: www.beltsvillegardenclub.org. 🌿