

Why We Need Garden Clubs

Blame it all on the *New Yorker*.

Ever since Helen Hokinson's matronly ladies—and orchid-toting butlers—appeared on its pages, garden clubs have been typecast as comic amateurs, convening over cucumber sandwiches and cups of Earl Grey tea.

That image was, of course, inaccurate then and now. The 21st-century garden clubber is an active environmentalist, a historic preservationist, a floral designer, a horticulturist. She or he uses social media; restores, improves, and protects the environment; and engages meaningfully with the broader community.

The late *New York Times* garden columnist Allen Lacy understood the challenge of unjust stereotypes: "Gardening is not a hobby, and only non-gardeners would describe it as such," he wrote back in 1998. "[M]ost hobbies are intellectually limited and make no reference to the larger world. By contrast, being wholeheartedly involved with gardens is involvement with life itself in the deepest sense."

As Lacy understood, gardening is more than just buying plants. Gardening is science. It's understanding that healthy environments require rich ecological diversity. It's finding a way to provide food in the face of war and famine. It's preserving rare species, which can unlock secrets to human health and longevity.

Working with flowers—and offering flower shows—is more than creating a pretty centerpiece. It is an opportunity to establish standards of excellence; to broaden knowledge of horticulture, conservation, and photography; and to share beauty and art with a wider audience. The Philadelphia Flower Show underscores the power of garden clubs—in simple dollars and cents, it has an economic impact of \$60 million.

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By Dede Petri, GCA President, Georgetown Garden Club, Zone VI

Garden clubs are about engaging with nature. Author Florence Williams writes about the "epidemic dislocation from the outdoors": Americans checking their phones 1,500 times a week; students spending more time indoors than outside; a majority of Americans living in cities, where engagement with nature is increasingly difficult. Is it any wonder that childhood obesity has reached alarming levels?

Garden clubs are an antidote to this epidemic. Those who have no awe for nature feel no need to respect or protect it. That's why garden clubs are actively engaging in communities as varied as Savannah and San Francisco. They provide education in the schools, maintain public gardens, teach prison inmates about propagation, educate the public about recycling. They implement horticultural therapy in hospital gardens and illustrate "farm to table" in community and urban harvest programs.

Garden clubs are also conservationists. Through concerted action, they help address climate change, protect native habitat, and maintain and sustain public lands. Only a few years after garden clubs across the country pledged to grow milkweed, scientists reported an identifiable resurgence in the monarch population in Mexico. Annually, garden clubs contribute millions of dollars to environmental and civic projects, offering a powerful private response to environmental problems at a time when public resources and public support are challenged.

Garden clubs matter because they respect the past and invest in the future. Thousands of historic sites are sustained through the efforts of dedicated volunteers. They understand that a garden is not made in a day or a week or a month. Like friendships, gardening requires sustained care and maintenance, hard work, and a love of the unknown. Gardening teaches us persistence, humility, humor, and hope. To grow a garden, as so many poets and writers have recognized, is to be an optimist.

Gardening unites us as a people—across time, and through families and cultures. Most if not all of us have some special memories of plants and gardens: a rose that reminds us of a beloved grandmother; a bush transplanted from one home to another; a tree propagated from seed; a "gift plant" now dominating the backyard. Garden clubs matter because they foster appreciation and protection of our ever-changing land. In different places, and in different ways, we all find a common connection.