



The First Fifty Years of the Virginia Beach Council of Garden Clubs, Inc.

By Virginia Gayle, Historian

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Happy Birthday!

Today, we're celebrating the anniversary, the birth, of the Virginia Beach Council of Garden Clubs.

That seems like such a simple statement. But it says nothing of the truly significant contributions made over the years by garden clubbers to the city we all love. If a magic wave of the hand could remove all the beauty owed, in part, to garden clubbers, what a changed place Virginia Beach would be! And the poorer for it!

When six garden clubs (Bay Colony, Birdneck, Cavalier, Linkhorn Park, Princess Anne and Virginia Beach) organized the Council of Garden Clubs of Princess Anne County and Virginia Beach on July 31, 1950, they had a vision of "improving and beautifying" our area. They could never have dreamed what a far-reaching impact their small beginning would have.

When the Council was born, Virginia Beach, as we know it today, did not exist, and Princess Anne County was largely farmland. Middle Plantation, Cypress Point, Green Run and countless other places we now recognize as garden club locales were not yet a gleam in a real estate agent's eyes.

The birth pangs of what is now Virginia Beach were not to come until January 1, 1963, when Virginia Beach and Princess Anne County merged.

In the beginning Mrs. Floyd Dormire, president of the Virginia Beach Garden Club, was elected president of the new organization, and served from 1950 until 1952. A campaign offering prizes for home, hotel, service station and store clean-up was the first undertaking. During this period, Council went before the Board of Supervisors and secured garbage collection for the Seatack, Atlantic Park and Great Neck areas.

Mrs. Gilmore Tilbrook (Charlotte) was elected president in 1952, and served until 1957, during which time Council undertook beautification projects of the grounds of the Seatack Community Center and the ocean end of the 31st Street right of way. The projects were done with contributions of shrubbery and the cooperation of property owners.

During this period the beautification of 47 blocks of Atlantic Avenue, where the old Norfolk and Southern Railway right of way went from the Cavalier Hotel to Fort Story, was a mammoth undertaking. It required two and a half years of planning and consultation, and about \$15,000 to complete. The first plantings of Japanese black pine were made in this project.

It should be noted that during this period 5000 dogwood trees were planted through the efforts of the clubs, without whose support none of these things could have been possible.

When the president heard of a bargain in dogwoods, Council ordered 400 of the 5-foot trees, making them available to garden club members at \$3.00 each. They were, indeed, a bargain. There are those who still remember the instructions for bushel basket sized holes - and the consternation of husbands. But you can still see those trees growing around the Beach today!

In 1957, when Mrs. John Anderson (Helen) was elected president, Council had grown to twelve clubs. Clean-up campaigns were undertaken, with essay and poster contests in schools to encourage interest. Landscaping was done on the right of ways between 42nd and 45th Streets and the Oceanfront, and at the Dome Convention Center. It might also be of interest that, during this period, Council assisted with the formation of the Boardwalk Art Show and provided hostesses for the event. It was during this period, too, that Virginia Beach and surrounding populated areas were declared a bird sanctuary through concerted efforts of Council members and the interest of Mary Tayloe Gwathmey, Council member and former Life Magazine photographer.

Perhaps you've wondered when the magic of flowers dawned like sunburst on the area many of us call "The Strip." It was during Mrs. Anderson's tenure that Town Manager Russell Hatchett executed the first planting of flowers for Beach beautification, initiating the planting of petunias at various locations on Atlantic Avenue, with geraniums planted in the triangle near the Cavalier Hotel.

Mrs. John Field (Peggy) assumed the leadership of Council from 1959 until 1961, and "Project Petunia" took wing. The project, under the chairmanship of Mrs. Arthur Winder, was a tremendous success as merchants and hotel owners were encouraged to plant splashes of red and white color along Atlantic Avenue. (It would be hard to imagine anyone refusing Mary Winder, such a soft-spoken lady.) As you drive "The Strip," you might well remember that "Project Petunia" was the forebear of the eye-popping displays you see today!

During the same time-frame, the Mile-of-Trash-Walk was an innovative way of confronting an ever present problem; and, a continuing campaign to have the Beverage Association promote proper disposal of bottles and cans attacked another. Council also participated in requests for restrictions of billboards.

Under the leadership of Mrs. E. F. Blake, Jr. (Alice), who served from 1961 until 1963, "Project Petunia" grew to include Pacific Avenue and Laskin Road as well. Council contracted to plant the grounds of the Boy Scout meeting lodge; and about 500 oleanders were sold and planted in Beach areas. Council's influence was felt - and continued to grow as it became a member of the Council of Civic Organizations.

During the tenure of Mrs. August Culpepper (Olive), who served from 1963 until 1967, a "Crepe Myrtle Trail" was begun along General Booth Blvd. and First Colonial Road A major beautification project at Virginia Beach General Hospital (one that was to take nearly 5 years and about \$10,000) was undertaken, with plantings, first, of crepe myrtle trees. Many Club pledges, individual gifts and the Hospital Auxiliary gift made the effort possible. During this productive era, the Virginia Beach Beautification Commission was formed through the efforts of Mrs. Culpepper and her committee.

Mrs. C. L. Hershberger (Margaret), who served from 1967 until 1969, continued the Virginia Beach Hospital landscaping project. The crepe myrtle was adopted by Council as its official flower and, at Council's recommendation, it was adopted as the official flower of Virginia Beach.

During Mrs. Arthur Gallagher's (Mary Ellen) tenure from 1969 until 1971, a long and wonderful relationship with the Sears, Roebuck Foundation began with Council's involvement in the HANDS (Home and Neighborhood Development Sponsor) program, which proved to be a blessing to clubs and communities throughout the city. Their sponsorship with "seed" money, the sponsorship of the Beautification Commission and Council's special relationship with the Virginia Beach City Landscape Services Division has helped to make wonderful things happen. Council members were present with 100 arrangements for the dedication of the new Municipal Complex; and in September 1969, Council's Newsletter was first published. Other activities included the establishment of a Wildflower Preserve and a Fragrance Garden for the visually handicapped at Red Wing Park. Council now numbered 53 clubs and 1400 members.

Mrs. John C. Brewington (Sylvia) served as president from 1971 until 1973. During her tenure Redwing Park Gardens were established, which included a large memorial rose garden in memory of Olive Culpepper, redwing azaleas honoring Council presidents, a conservation garden of Virginia's endangered native flowers, and the garden honoring those who served in Southeast Asia (the "POW Garden"). Additionally, Virginia Beach Hospital beautification was completed; the Crepe Myrtle Ball was held, with proceeds used to provide 350 crepe myrtle trees planted throughout the city; and landscaping was done at the Redwing Lake Golf Course club house. Council received the first place award for community improvement in the HANDS South Atlantic District. (The competition was from West Virginia through Kentucky and all the way to Florida!)

Mrs. Glenn McClanan (Reba) was elected president in 1973, and served until 1975. During this time landscaping was done at the Northampton entrance to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel and to the medians on Independence Boulevard. Extensive work took place to save the Francis Land House for its historical value; the Colonial Garden was established at the Municipal Center; the Dome parking lot was landscaped with trees and shrubbery; and work was done with school groups in the planting of dune grass - a program termed Dune Deliverance. Of great importance was work on the drive to pass the Shade Tree, Erosion Control and Billboard Ordinances.

Mrs. Roger Hall (Mari) accepted the reins of leadership in 1975, and she, her fellow officers and committee chairmen cast their eyes about for the next round of projects. Among those taken on were the Liberty Trail on Laskin Road, Birdneck Road and in the Hilltop area; Landscaping of Northampton Boulevard, the Norwegian Lady Plaza and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge approach; pampas grass plantings on Atlantic Avenue; and a Japanese garden at Red Wing Park. And time was still found for Mt. Trashmore beautification and other activities.

Mrs. M. F. McAfee (Jim) served as president from 1977 until 1979. One of the crowning achievements of that period was the Bayville Park Gazebo and Flag Plaza, and the plantings. Landscaping was done at the United Way Family Center; the Herb Garden was established at Francis Land House; and the Mary Ellen Gallagher Memorial Garden was created at Red Wing Park.

Mrs. Milton W. Thorpe (Booda) was elected president in 1979 and served until 1981. During her tenure, Council contributed to establishing the Marine Science Museum, sponsored the Clean Campus Contest, supported and participated in the planting of dune grass, and planted memorial trees on Great Neck Road.

Mrs. William W. Werndli (Janet), who served so ably as HANDS chairman, accepted the presidency in 1981 and served until 1983. The Council was a driving force in the preservation of the Francis Land House for use as a historic site. Council projects at this time included the planting of dwarf Chinese hollies on the median across from the Pavilion, landscaping the site of the Admiral de Grasse statue at Fort Story, and providing floral arrangements for the Battle of the Capes Commemoration.

Mrs. John Vance (Reithie) was elected president in 1983 and served until 1985. Records are not available at this time, but there are memories of Council being ably led, and of a spectacular flower show at the Dome. Homes had become too small to accommodate the Board, and meetings were moved to a room at the Pilot Building on Virginia Beach Boulevard.

Mrs. Donald Miller (Johnny) became president in 1985 and led Council until 1987. Her tenure is marked by the opening of the Francis Land House to the public with Council providing docents and other volunteers. Council lent their support to the "Bottle Bill," the phosphate ban for the Chesapeake Bay, the revised Virginia Beach Tree Ordinance, the local Billboard Ordinance, and the Parking Lot Landscape Ordinance. Support was also given to the Virginia Marine Science Museum, and the parking lot of the Human Resources Building on Virginia Beach Boulevard was landscaped.

Council's range of activities and influence had spread into areas far beyond anything its creators might have hoped for.

Mrs. Bruce Brown (Ann) accepted the presidency for the 1987-1989 period, with Council lending support to the preservation of green areas at Upper Wolfsnare Plantation, and landscaping at the site of the Municipal Flag Pole. Funds were provided for the west side screening (landscaping) of the Francis Land House, a contribution was made to Operation Sunburst, and 300 daffodil bulbs were contributed to Seatack Elementary School.

Mrs. James Fletcher (Georgia) led Council from 1989 until 1991. In our era of conspicuous consumption, people were becoming more aware that space and natural resources are not inexhaustible, and Council supported curbside recycling. They also continued support of Operation Sunburst, the Landscape Ordinance, and preservation of the DeWitt Cottage at the oceanfront. In addition, thousands of daylilies were planted at the Kempsville Library.

From 1991 until 1993, Mrs. Howard Kinlaw (Kathleen) served as president. During that period, benches were donated to the Water Wise Demonstration Garden at Mt. Trashmore.

Mrs. Clarence Warnstaff (Chris) was elected president in 1993 and served until 1995. Tree planting was done at the Virginia Beach Recreation Center, and brass plaques were placed at Yoshino cherry trees at the Municipal Center.

Mrs. Howard Kinlaw (Kathleen) was again elected president, to serve from 1995 until 1997. During this period, eighteen Yoshino cherry trees were planted on the median near the Virginia Beach Visitors' Information Center, memorial camellias and Azalea beds were added at Redwing Park, and a donation was made to the Virginia Beach Library.

Mrs. Harry J. Dennis (Carolyn) accepted the presidency in 1997 and was to serve until 1999. When asked what she did during her tenure, she replied that they did all of the usual things that Council does: celebrating Arbor Day, decorating the Francis Land House, wreath making at the Municipal Center, decorating for the Neptune Festival Senior Citizens' Ball. Things like that. And that's what all of these presidents have done. Things like that! Big things, and small things. But things that made a difference! Among the bigger things later mentioned were the floral arrangements for the Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs State Convention, the purchase of a custom-crafted reproduction cupboard for the Francis Land House, hosting the Tidewater District Virginia Federation of Garden Clubs fall meeting, and fund-raisers that brought in the means of most good deeds.

Last, but certainly not least, Susie Duckworth was elected to serve from 1999 until 2001! And what can be said of our Susie? That she's a dynamic leader? Assuredly! That she, her fellow officers and committee chairmen have done all of the usual things that Council people do? Without a doubt! But the thing that gives her the most satisfaction has been participation in the Empty Bowls program presented by the Ceramic Design Association, for which Council provided floral arrangements. For this event, food and bowls are donated, the bowl is yours to take home, and proceeds go to the local Tidewater Food Bank. The symbolism of the empty bowl is difficult to forget, and Council plans to continue this relationship.

The HANDS 2000-2001 Projects are Wildflower Plantings at Ferrell Parkway and Landscaping at Thoroughgood House.

Of necessity, many fine things are not included in this report. Scholarships to horticulture students, an on-going activity, fall in this category. Support for the Virginia Department of Transportation's plan to make Pacific Avenue a one-way street in Council's early years, and support, later, for a one-way Atlantic Avenue, were failed battles. But sometimes, battles are rejoined. And success is achieved.

The work of our clubs is too impressive not to be acknowledged. In their communities and in their support, they are always there - the backbone of our organization.

Council has traveled quite a road during these past fifty years. It has taken us from party-line service in a rural society and placed us squarely in the DOT.COM generation. Our Web site and email went live on August 24, 2000, with the compliments of VSA Publishing owner Virginia S. Anderson, the daughter of Council's third president, Helen Anderson.

And now, we look forward to the next fifty years, to a Council warmed by our good wishes, and to accomplishments we can only imagine.

Virginia Gayle, Historian
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With sincere gratitude to Marvel Mustard, Susie Duckworth, president, and Sylvia Brewington, past president, without whom this report would not have been possible.

Visit our web site at
<http://groups.gohamptonroads.com/GardenClubCouncil>