

## History of the Garden Growers

We are attempting, Stevie Service and Lila Sexton, to record the history of the Garden Growers. We started in 1974 as an outgrowth of the Native Plant Gardeners, an informal group that met about once a month, sometimes at the Garden, sometimes at the home of a member. Polly Anderson was secretary, Lila Sexton was treasurer. We learned a lot about each other's gardens and about native plants in general. Dara Emery had the idea of having a group of volunteers take over the old horticulture unit and turn it into a meaningful operation where we could raise native plants for sale for the benefit of the Botanic Garden. And that is exactly what we decided to do at a meeting which Dara called in the library in early 1974. At that meeting he chose Ann Eldridge, who had worked with him as horticultural assistant, to be our first leader. Jean Menzies gave us five hundred dollars, and the Native Plant Gardeners turned over their treasury of somewhat less than two hundred dollars, and we started out. That was our beginning.

The original group of Growers included Polly Anderson, Alpha Botize Stanley Hoyt, Carol King, Florence Sanchez, Stevie Service, Lila Sexton, Eve Shipp, Richard Weindling and Donald McElroy. From 1974 until 1979 Ann Eldridge was in charge. During the years 1980-1982 Florence Sanchez took over. In 1983 and 1984, Blair Gray, Lila Sexton and Stevie Service acted as a committee to direct the Growers' activities.

After Blair Gray resigned in 1984 there was a period when Stevie, Lila and Jean Palmer-Carpenter directed the Growers. Then in 1986 Lilla Logan and Jean acted as a directing committee, and from 1986 on Jean took over direction by herself.

At first we concentrated on repairing the hot frame, which was essential for rooting cuttings. Mr. McElroy did most of this work. He also provided a strong box which we still use to protect our books, and a pencil sharpener.

We planted seeds, and made cuttings, emphasizing native plants, as we had planned when the group was organized. But we soon realized that the general public wanted to buy more exotic plants, and so we included ivies, geraniums, house plants and succulents. In each of these categories we tried to find the more unusual examples which were not readily available in nurseries. Very much aware of our limited financial resources, we begged and borrowed tools, hoses and pots, and brought cuttings and plants from our own gardens. One purchase we made was memorable; we paid forty dollars for a yard of "topsoil", which proved to be very black, sticky, bog soil. So we bought coarse sand, peat and perlite to mix in, and in the end our economy proved false.

At that time we used to have informal sales under the oak outside of the information center. On Sundays we would set up a table and present out plants for sale, and we made a very little money. We were probably our own best customers. Early on, Stevie Service pointed out a very important thing - she said we were here not only to sell plants, but to educate the public or at least try to interest people in native plants, and to give them horticultural information about the plants. Cosette Buser designed our first sign, and we began to feel very professional.

Along the way we have accumulated some funny tales of our exploits. Some involved only one Grower, others many. One Grower who worked with us in our early years, Eve Shipp, scouted out a high school boy who had an enviable collection of ivies that he was growing at Santa Barbara High for a science project. He told her she could buy some plants and arranged to meet her on a weekend at the school. Arriving at the appointed place, Eve found a dismayed young lad apologizing for the fact that everything

was locked up, and the only entry to the lath house was over a high chain link fence. He obviously thought this older woman, in her late twenties, incapable of scaling such a fence. Eve surprised him and nimbly went up and over. She brought a wonderful collection of ivies back to the Growers. That formed the nucleus of our ivy collection for years, and we still have some of them, including 'Shamrock,' 'Ivalace' and 'Manda's Crested.'

All the original Growers can still laugh remembering the mag-amp caper! Mag-amp looks very like perlite, both being white and large-grained. We had taken a batch of Ceanothus cuttings and prepared them for the mist unit at the Garden's main horticultural unit. Unwittingly we filled the tray with mag-amp instead of perlite. You can imagine our shock when we checked on the cuttings a week later and found only brown, lifeless sticks. Mag-amp is a very strong fertilizer – one mixes a small amount with a large amount of soil. We stored the mag-amp and perlite side by side in garbage cans, unlabeled. That was our undoing, for we almost compounded our error. The next batch of cuttings was prepared and someone went out to fill the tray. We did it again, but this time we caught our mistake and refilled the trays with perlite. We all had a good laugh, and never again made the same mistake.

We have had a lot of fun over the years disposing of dead or dying plants, or even overgrown ones by tossing them "over the hill." We even joke about an "over-the-hill club" composed of those of us less inclined to nurse a sickly plant back to health. Years ago, those of us who took Dara's propagation class were taught to throw discarded plants and material over the hill. There must be an amazing array of plant material down there.

When we started out, we only had the use of the lath house and the lower canyard [now the Arbor Terrace picnic area]. The glass house [saran house] was filled with Dr. Philbrick's cactus collection, and the small lath house we called Marta's was filled with Marta Walters' collection of research lilies. Over the years we have made a lot of improvements. There was one fine to-do when Ann and Lila moved Dr. Philbrick's cacti from the glass house to the lower canyard. This was not met with great enthusiasm on his part, but it finally gave us space in the glass house. We used the glass house for some months, until we realized that it was in very frail condition, and one of our members, Dr. Balch, painstakingly took out all the panes of glass, painted the entire house, and made it ready for Saran to be stretched over it. Meanwhile Dr Balch's wife, Phoebe, was busy bringing us all sorts of cuttings, and working as hard as any of us.

Lila's husband, Joe, put Saran over the house, because we had abandoned the idea of being able to afford a heating and cooling system. He also at that time did over some of our benches, and built a bench and bins in the canyard, making space available for moving plants to gallon cans. He also did over the hot frame. These improvements were much appreciated and the Growers gave a champagne party to inaugurate the new facilities.

Somewhat later, a shade structure was added to the upper canyard sales area [the patio area]. And Sean Hutchinson covered our potting benches with stainless steel, and built a new potting bench in the new lath house. More recently John Cornwell put a new lath roof over the canyard, and added a plastic cover over the potting area in the large lath house.

In the first few years of our operation we undoubtedly made very little money, if any.

In fact, we probably ran in the red for at least a year or two. We started, as we mentioned, with about seven hundred dollars in our treasury. Gradually we began to earn \$5,000 or \$6,000 a year. In 1986 and 1987 our earnings were about \$12,000 per year.

One thing we should probably say now and perhaps should have said earlier: Stevie and I are making this record because we are the only two active members of the original group left. Over the years we have had people come and go, join the Growers, work hard with us for a time and then leave for diverse reasons. Some moved out of town, some chose to volunteer for other organizations, and some died. The original group was joined at various times, sometimes for brief periods, sometimes for years, by:

Harry Balch, Phoebe Balch, Blair Gray, Connie Schott, Diane Eliot, Janie Walmsley, Edith Wygant, Diana Searcy (who was a wonderful help in developing our cactus and succulent collections), Fawzia Talbert, Frances Bird, Mae Blakley (who took over the succulents when Diana left), William Brown (Brother Bill), Sean Hutchinson, Sheri Kantor, Lilla Logan, Kathy McCormick, Jean Palmer-Carpenter, Hans Rehm, Kathy Bresslin, Lutie Fitzgerald, Rosemary Maxfield, Larry Shennum, and Loren Krabill.

One thing we would like to mention is that we have a grounds man, Wayne Larimore, who takes the reins on Sundays when the Growers are open from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m.

This was always a difficult time to staff with volunteers, and Wayne has proved an excellent salesman.

In addition to being open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., and Sundays from 11 a.m. until 3 p.m., we have sales throughout the year. We always participated in the annual fall sale, to a small amount in the beginning and, as years went by, to a larger and larger amount. We also have a spring sale in April, which features Iris and many flowering plants. Last summer, for the first time, Jean initiated a sale that truly was a "sale" – the prices were marked down. These were plants that we knew we could not carry over until the fall in gallon containers. All of these sales have been very successful, and increasingly so in recent years.

The Grower members as of August 1988 are:

Mae Blakley, Jean Carpenter, Caroline Conner, Tove Herlow, Sean Hutchinson, Loren Krabill, Lilla Logan, Helena Robinson, Stevie Service, Lila Sexton, Marianne Steidl, Bettine Wallin, and Ruth Wolf.

---written in 1988