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Harbarger: The Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden 1979-1997
THE HUNTSVILLE MADISON COUNTY BOTANICAL GARDEN
1979 -1997
“A JEWEL IN HUNTSVILLE’S CROWN”

by

Harvilee Phillips Harbarger

Recent history can be equally interesting as the ancient past. The following is an account, largely chronological, of how one of the brightest jewels in Huntsville’s Crown, the Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden, came into existence.

In December, 1979, fourteen people met with the sole purpose of establishing a botanical garden in Huntsville, Alabama. This far-sighted group--Nell Bragg, Drucilla Esslinger, Harvilee Harbarger, Henry Joiner, Gail Kelly, Grady Kennedy, Evelyn Lucas, Duane Miller, Garry Murray, Ellie Salopez, Donald Saxton, Margaret Saxton, Mary Ann Terry, and Rosa Belle VanValkenburgh--became the founders of the garden. The first official meeting of the Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden Society was held in January, 1980. Garry Murray was elected the first president, by-laws were drafted, and working committees were established.

In March, 1980, articles of incorporation were filed, and the Society was duly organized as a non-profit corporation under the provisions of the Alabama Non-Profit Corporation Act (Act 578, Regular Session 1955; Chapter 10, Sections 203-263 of Title 10, *Code of Alabama*, 1940). The Garden was incorporated in the County of Madison (Corporation. Book 58, pages 1041-1047).

In March, 1981, the Society was recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as an organization exempt from federal income taxes under section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. It was determined that the Society was an organization as described in sections 170 (B)(1)(A)(vi) and 509 (A)(1). Therefore, contributions to the Society were declared deductible as provided in section 170 of the Code.

The 112-acre site which the Garden occupies was provided by the U.S. Army through the Alabama Space Science Commission and the City of Huntsville. This land, located on the northeast corner of Redstone Arsenal was originally part of the Arsenal reservation owned by the U.S. Army, and was transferred by deed (and an Act of Congress) from the Department of the Army to the Alabama Space Science Exhibit Commission (ASSEC) in February, 1981. One of the covenants of the deed states that the land must be used for recreational and educational purposes. A remarkable site, the land combines both typical lowland and highland forest and gently rolling meadows as well as an unusual bog area.

Beginning the second year, in 1982, Grady Kennedy was elected as President of the Society. Meetings were held, ideas for the garden were exchanged, and in January, 1983, the Society recommended to the City of Huntsville that the future Botanical Garden be established on the property leased to the city from the ASSEC. During the months that followed, many hours were spent developing a concept plan for the Botanical Garden. This was completed in September, 1983, by Harbarger Landscape Design, Inc.; Harvillee Harbarger ASLA and Julie Harbarger Stephens ASLA were the principle designers. John Martz, local artist and draftsman, contributed his talents to the plan. These plans and perspectives for the first 35 acres of development were presented as a gift to the Garden.

Upon the resignation of Grady Kennedy in October, 1984, vice-president Evelyn Lucas became president of the Society. Mrs. Lucas was subsequently elected to two full terms in office. During her tenure the Garden began to take shape. Julie Stephens and Garry Murray rode on the front of a road grader provided by the Madison County Commission and directed where the roads would be in this initial phase. Then, in October, 1985, Huntsville Mayor Joe Davis, Madison County Commission Chairman Mike Gillespie, representatives from the U.S. Army and Garden Society members gathered on the site to plant the first new tree, a Southern Magnolia, to celebrate dedication and groundbreaking.

By June, 1986, an Executive Director was hired to provide full-time coordination of the development effort. Phase One plans were finalized to include specific plantings so that the Garden could begin to take shape. The various support groups interested in the plan, such as iris, rose, day lily, herb, and wildflower, were all becoming actively involved in planting their designated areas.

Mrs. Jerry (Butch) Damson assumed the position of President of the Botanical Garden Society in January 1987, and the initial fencing of the property was completed. During the two years of Butch Damson's presidency, her enthusiasm and energy propelled membership growth and activity. Many projects were accomplished, such as an annual plant sale, and artist Sallie B. Cobb was commissioned to create the first print/poster to be used in fund raising. A Board of Advisors was formed with Roy Nichols as the first chairman, and the first phases of the Rose Garden and the Herb Garden were completed.

Because of Huntsville's involvement with putting a man on the moon, the Society decided on a goal of specifically incorporating into its world class Botanical Garden a space/high technology theme, reflecting the spirit of the community. During this time Robert Montgomery resigned as the first Executive Director of the Garden to accept another position, and Al Privette was hired in August, 1987, as horticulture and site manager. The first portion of the

irrigation system was completed, and the Nature Trail/Wildflower Garden was established.

During this time the Madison County Committee of the U.S. Constitutional Bicentennial Commission, headed by past Madison County Commission Chairman James Record, began planning a project known as Constitution Walk. There fifty-five maple trees, donated by members, were planted as a living memorial to the fifty-five signers of the U.S. Constitution.

Continuing this exciting and busy time in the Garden, work was initiated on the Day Lily Garden, Iris Garden, Turf Plots, and meadows. All Phase One roads were upgraded, and approximately 10,000 daffodil bulbs were planted along an interior roadway. Contracts were let for the entrance road, parking lot, pond and drainage, and sanitary sewer installations. With all of this progress Mayor Joe Davis, the City Council, and the Alabama Space Science Exhibit Commission approved building plans so work could begin on the Administration Building. Looking to future development, the Garden employed the services of the firm Environmental Planning and Design of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, to develop a master plan for the entire 112 acres.



The administration building

The Garden Guild was organized as a support group, and immediately became active in raising funds to benefit all aspects of the garden. The money raised by these energetic volunteers was used for basic needs, and their activities continue to provide much needed support.

On May 21, 1988, the Garden was opened to the public; in August of that year a mission statement was adopted, and the Founders' Dinner held at the Von Braun Civic Center was a great success. Bill Snoddy succeeded Butch Damson as president in March, 1989, and proceeded to lead the Garden's development in accordance with its mission statement: "Our Garden will achieve world class recognition by balancing year-round botanical displays, strong educational programs and specialized research showcased with high technology. The unique aspect of our Garden will be the building of traditional botanical garden elements, the aesthetic heritage of our region, the conservation of natural resources, and our thrust into space and the future."

April, 1989, brought springtime to the Garden and the opening and dedication of Constitution Walk was held, with Governor Guy Hunt in attendance. Phase One was completed, and the master planner Geoffrey L. Rausch discussed future plans with the Board. Completion of the Administration/Education Building was celebrated with a plant sale, Founders Appreciation Party, and a Spring Festival. At this time the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) held an impressive flag-pole dedication ceremony.

Many functions involving hundreds of Garden members were held including the first biennial tour of Huntsville's Elegant Gardens. Two rare black Australian swans were donated by swan breeder Mark Jones to become residents on the pond, and a contest to name the swans was won by William I. Dale who named the elegant birds Flora and Fauna. They were a topic of conversation and objects of observation enjoyed by all until their demise, caused it was determined, by night mauling wildlife.

Since the Garden was mandated to be used as a tool for learning, a botanical presentation was set up in the city and county schools. Speakers for this program were Garden volunteers. When school opened in 1989, the programs were given, on site, in the Garden where each fifth grade class in the city and county schools was given a docent-guided tour of Phase One of the Garden. These tours are annual events, and are a regularly scheduled field trip on the school calendar.

Southern Living magazine sponsored a show house fund raiser. The Garden Guild Fall Flower Show, held at the Von Braun Civic Center, attracted participants from all over the north Alabama area. Because volunteers were and continue to be such a vital part of the Garden, all volunteers were recognized at the first volunteer recognition party. A support greenhouse was installed to be managed by the maintenance crew.

Recycling became a focus as the Garden joined with the city to become pioneers in recycling leaves collected in the fall. The city's collection trucks stockpile leaves at the garden's mulch area where they become valuable soil amendments through natural composting. Each year between March and October, the city provides a front-end loader on Saturday mornings to load mulch into individuals' trucks. There is no fee for this mulch, although donations are accepted and appreciated, with all donations going directly to support the Garden. This program has been recognized as a success, and plays a vital role in the city's waste management program while providing an important resource to local gardeners. After Christmas each year, Christmas trees are collected at various locations in the city, brought to the Garden, shredded, and added to the mulch pile.

At the annual membership meeting in March, 1990, Roy J. Nichols was installed as president, and the new president held a reception to introduce the new Executive Director, Gary Paul. For accounting purposes, the Botanical Garden went from a calendar year to a fiscal year (October - September) to coincide with the City of Huntsville's fiscal year. On June 14, 1990, an agreement between the City and the Garden was signed by Mayor Steve Hettinger and City Council President Ernest Kaufmann, acknowledging that the Garden would utilize 112 acres of property.

Cornucopia, a fall festival, which includes plant sales, art shows, hand-made crafts, children's shows, family entertainment featuring local talent, hay rides, food and fun was introduced in 1990. It has become a regular October event in the Garden.

More room was needed for office space and educational programs, so the educational annex was purchased and erected with contributions in labor and money from the membership. A resolution to adopt and approve the Master Plan was approved in December, 1991, and by April, 1992, a Capital Campaign began to implement Phase One of the Master Plan.

The first Camp Botanica got under way in 1992 with forty children enrolled in the week-long sessions. Contracts were signed to build the Center for Biospheric Educational Research (CBER) and the Central Corridor Gardens, both parts of the Master Plan. The Garden was working closely with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to develop a high technology and space theme, and an agreement was approved with NASA and the Marshall Space Flight Center for acceptance of a space node to be placed in the Center for Biospheric Education and Research. During this time the resignation of Gary Paul, Executive Director, was accepted, and Jack Charlton was approved by the Board as Acting Director.



The Corridor Garden

During Nichols' term, the pace was fast and the true shape of the Garden was coming together. A Huntsville native, Harvey Cotten, was approved as the new Executive Director in November 1992. During this period of rapid growth, a full site Master Plan was approved by the City Planning Commission, a kick-off breakfast for a \$1.5 million Capital Campaign was held, and the Horticulture and Site Development Committee was authorized to proceed with bids for the Center for Biospheric Educational Research building and the Corridor Garden hardscape. This phase in the life of the Garden moved along with the increasing interest of members, the hard work of numerous volunteers, and the leadership of Cotten. Groundbreaking Ceremonies were held for CBER and the Corridor Gardens.

Since home composting had become an important part of the waste management issues facing the country, the Botanical Garden took a leading role in educating the public on the benefits and mechanics of composting as well as the mechanics. Al Privette, Director of Horticulture at the Garden, researched and designed the compost demonstration area, located adjacent to the Vegetable Demonstration Garden. Currently the Garden is offering the classes which an individual must complete in order to receive a compost bin from the city. This activity is part of the city's solid waste program. Classes are scheduled

Harbarger: The Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden 1979-1997 through the Clean Community Office, and have been full at every session. The City reports a decrease in the quantity of garbage picked up since the compost program began.

When Madison County's third courthouse was demolished in 1964, the twenty limestone columns that were the main feature of the structure were salvaged and stored. The columns were moved to the Garden in 1985 to be used for future development. Three of these columns were used in the design of the entrance to the Garden on Bob Wallace Avenue which was built in 1991. The remaining sections are to be used in future garden designs.



The Garden's main entrance with columns from the third Madison County Courthouse

The Garden continued to grow and expand, and with Bill Snoddy as president, a giant step was taken when he presided over a ribbon cutting ceremony for the opening of the Center for Biospheric Educational Research in September 1994. Loretta Spencer became the Garden's fifth president, and served to keep the garden growing from September 1994 to September 1996.

The Fern Glade in the Garden was growing well, and the Fern Society completed landscaping, by adding a water feature to its site. Ferns were propagating well enough to offer some for sale, with funds going to support upkeep of the Glade. The original Rose Garden was renovated and the Rose Society planted five hundred new rose bushes.

The entire community rallied to save a one-hundred-year-old dogwood tree (*Cornus Florida*) that was to be destroyed during the widening of Old Madison Pike. City and county services, volunteers and school children all over the city and county played vital roles in saving this beautiful tree by moving it to a place of honor in the Garden. This is just one more example of all the combined efforts taken to make the Garden a reality. It is truly “everybody’s Garden.”

The Day Lily Garden was designated as a test garden and a display garden by the American Hemerocallis Society. Fund raisers including the Annual Plant Sale, were all successful and new membership categories were introduced. Butch Damson consented to lead the Botanical Garden by serving another term as president, and was duly installed at the annual meeting in September, 1996.

Plans for the first Galaxy of Lights (a Christmas fantasy) were begun. The Christmas Galaxy of Lights involving hundreds of hours of volunteer time to install the electrical displays and to staff the attraction which was open to the public from Thanksgiving through New Year’s Eve attracted thousands of visitors to see the lighting extravaganza..

Future plans include the enlargement of educational and meeting facilities and an exciting new project--a constructed wetland. A constructed wetland is, in lay terms, a biological system that can take effluents from a septic tank and through natural processes treat or clean the waste and return it safely to the environment. Systems like this have been in use in this country for ten years; however, the Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden is proposing to build one totally new and unique. This reciprocating constructed wetland system is state-of-the-art technology developed by the Tennessee Valley Authority. When installed, it will be the first of its kind in use at a public facility in the United States.

Since breaking ground in the 1980s, Huntsville’s Botanical Garden has become one of the most active and dynamic gardens in the country. Membership has grown from 454 in the early years to 3,125 single and family memberships in 1997.

Within the Garden today, the natural beauty of the site has been enhanced with the development of various gardens, rolling meadows, and acres of open tended lawn. Paths meander through the shady stands of native trees of the Dogwood Trail, and native wildflowers pop up and surprise visitors as they stroll through the Nature Trail that leads to the Fern Glade and the Shade Garden. The newly renovated Rose Garden is located on a knoll overlooking the Reflecting Pond and Constitution Walk. The Vegetable Demonstration Garden and the compost demonstration area are the beginnings of a Home Demonstration Garden. The Herb Garden with its raised brick planters is a very popular place for visitors.

The Central Corridor Gardens flow over five acres and comprise three theme gardens: the Perennial Garden, the Aquatic Garden, and the Annual Garden. The Perennial Garden provides a constant display of color and texture throughout the year. The Aquatic Pavilion is the heart of the Aquatic Garden, with fountains in front and large peaceful pool in the rear, full of water plants. To the west the Summer House surrounded by beds of dazzling color comprise the Annual Garden. Many weddings are held throughout the year in these attractive areas.



Aquatic Garden and Pavillion

The Garden created a link between Huntsville's high technology community, the space program, and the leading industries that have contributed so much to the city's growth and success. This link became a focus on biospherics--the study of close ecological systems. The first phase of CBER is devoted to public education dealing with the principles associated with biospherics. This is presented through exhibits such as the Biosphere Earth Exhibit, a fourteen-foot sphere that serves as a circular projection screen for an audio-visual presentation on the thin layer of life surrounding the planet earth. A full-size Space Station Node comprises the Demonstration Lunar Greenhouse in which visitors are shown how plants may be grown on the lunar surface using hydroponics. This focus on biospherics reveals the much greater role plants play in human environments than the practical and aesthetic value often portrayed in botanical gardens.

Finally, the dreams and plans of the original fourteen visionaries have come to fruition. Along the way, many others have been and continue to be involved. In

a project of this magnitude, heated debate and uneasy compromises often were necessary to produce the consensus which led to the garden's ultimate success. The true strengths of the Garden lie in the work of its many volunteers and its dedicated staff. These volunteers serve as officers and board members, on the Advisory Board, in the educational programs, in the Garden Guild, and in the individual garden societies. There are many who serve on committees, who plan and support the fund raisers, who labor in the garden and on building projects, and who provide financial support. All of these continued and combined efforts have made the Huntsville Madison County Botanical Garden become a Garden "of the people, by the people and for the people."