



A Portrait of a 125-Year Friendship

*The Arnold Arboretum and the
Cambridge Plant & Garden Club*

Prepared from the records of the
Cambridge Plant & Garden Club

This year the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club marks the 125th anniversary of the founding of its mother club, the Cambridge Plant Club, the oldest women's garden club in the United States.¹ With such longevity comes much to celebrate, but one special cause for celebration is the club's long connection to the Arnold Arboretum. It is a connection that goes all the way back to the Plant Club's first meeting on January 28, 1889, when the charter members voted to take a subscription to *Garden and Forest*, Professor Charles S. Sargent's new periodical devoted (according to its first cover) to horticulture, landscape art, and forestry.

A love of plants and the desire to share horticultural knowledge were the twin impulses that led to the Plant Club's founding in the unseasonably warm January of 1889. (The snowdrops were blooming in midmonth and thoughts of spring planting were irresistible.) The club's founding members included women who were very knowledgeable about plants and gardens, and their enthusiasm was contagious. The club director's talent for growing plants was such that her house in winter and her garden in summer were crowded with flowers whose luxuriant growth filled all with wonder and admiration. Another

member had taken the summer course in botany at the Harvard Botanic Garden before she went on to take a degree at MIT in geology and botany. Still another member was a popular lecturer on botanical subjects. The three sisters at whose home the club was founded were particularly known for their devotion to their friends and gardening. In the summer, visitors were likely to find a sign at their door requesting "please walk 'round to the garden, the ladies are there," and rarely did a guest leave without a gift of flowers or fruit.

Living near Harvard College, the members of the Plant Club had a decidedly academic orientation. After all, many were the wives, daughters, nieces, granddaughters or grandnieces of professors. They were accustomed to attending educational lectures. Although Cambridge still had its rural aspects (nearby Belmont was a farming town), there was an interest in conserving plants that once grew bountifully in the environs of the increasingly urban city. The ladies visited the Harvard Botanic Garden often, and also enjoyed the friendship of its director, Professor George Lincoln Goodale. Indeed, some members had known Dr. Goodale's predecessor, the famous Dr. Asa Gray.

In the Plant Club's first year, the meetings featured member lectures or group discussions and workshops on topics of horticultural interest.² However, the

¹ The Plant Club was not the first women's garden club, but it is the oldest surviving garden club. The honor of being the first goes to the Garden Street Garden Club, another Cambridge club, which met from 1879 to 1897. Membership in the other club was small – only eleven ladies, including Mrs. Asa Gray, at the first meeting. (All lived in close proximity to the Harvard Botanic Garden. Meetings were on Monday afternoons at four (a potential for conflict with the Plant Club's meetings, also on Monday afternoons). The minutes of the Garden Street Garden Club include tips, facts, and personal stories about gardening, chronicle field trips to local greenhouses and gardens, and record the sharing of plants and flowers at meetings and various exhibitions. The archives of the club give no information as to why it disbanded.

² Some titles from the club's earliest years show the range of horticultural topics – from the practical and technical ("Sowing Seeds/Cuttings/Transplanting" and "Cross Fertilization and Hybridization"; particular favored plants ("Begonias" and "The Iris") advice, both general and obscure ("Selection, Arrangement, and Cultivation of House Plants" and "The Poisonous Properties of the *Primula obconica*"); and the world beyond Cambridge ("The Flora of Greenland" and "The Moral Influence of Flowers upon Prisoners").

club soon began to welcome outside speakers. The first (in March 1890) was Cambridge-based botanist, Mr. Walter Deane, whose topic was “Our Native Ferns” illustrated by “many fine specimens,” and the second (in June 1892) was Professor Goodale, whose talk was entitled, “The Principles Which Underlie Improvement in Cultivated Plants.”

The Arboretum’s founding director, Charles Sprague Sargent, was the third outside speaker to address the club. On December 13, 1892, he ventured to Cambridge where he “read a paper” to 11 ladies at Mrs. Arthur Fuller’s house at 13 Hilliard Street. (The club met biweekly, so by the calculation of the club’s secretary, he spoke at the club’s 73rd regular meeting.) Somewhat surprisingly, Professor Sargent’s topic was not trees or the Arboretum, but a flower – the columbine – and its fitness as a national flower. The minutes produced by the club’s recording secretary suggest that he was persuasive, though the scribe did not provide details. (Perhaps Professor Sargent’s paper is in the Arboretum’s archives?)

The next mention of the Arnold Arboretum in the Plant Club’s records came 11-plus years later. In early May 1904, Professor Sargent invited the ladies of the Plant Club to visit Holm Lea, his estate in Brookline. (The invitation seems to have been the result of a query by the club’s president.) This outing – the club’s second expedition as a group³ – was preceded by notable advance planning. A special rail car holding 45 was hired for the afternoon at a cost of \$8. In addition to club members, all who had addressed the

club over the past season were invited to accompany the group.⁴ Members were asked to notify the club secretary whether or not they intended going, so that vacant seats could be filled by members bringing friends, those notifying the secretary first, having the first choice.

On Monday June 6, members of the Plant Club boarded a special rail car at Harvard Square, which started a few minutes after three in the afternoon, reaching the Cypress Street Terminus in Brookline at 3:40 p.m. There Prof. Sargent’s gardener met them with a note inviting all to tea at the house after the inspection of the gardens. The head gardener escorted the ladies around the garden, showing them everything of interest and answering all their questions about the care and cultivation of plants. The club’s secretary noted that “the display of wisterias growing in tubs as trees was very interesting,” and that “the rhododendron and azaleas were very fine.”

A little before five, the club reached the Sargents’ home, where Mrs. Sargent received all most graciously, and tea, lemonade, sandwiches and cakes were served, “while the Club and friend enjoyed the spacious and beautiful rooms.” Mrs. Arnold, an honorary member of the Plant Club who lived near Professor Sargent, had joined the ladies at the Cypress Street Terminus and Miss Day of the Harvard Herbarium was a guest of the club, this

3 The first, in late March 1904, was to Waverley Oaks, a popular destination that had inspired the creation of The Trustees of Reservations a decade before. An added attraction of Waverley Oaks was a favored commercial greenhouse not far from the ancient white oaks.

4 Those speakers (and their talk titles and dates) included: Miss Prince, “A November Day in the Ipswich Dunes” (December 14, 1903); Miss Day (Librarian of the Harvard Herbarium), “Some Old Botanists Beginning with Adam and Eve.” (January 25, 1904); and Mr. Fernald (Instructor in Botany at Harvard), “Some Relations of Civilization and Our Native Flora,” or “Wild Flowers of the Future,” cited as the title in advance correspondence (February 29, 1904); and Miss Robbins, “The Beginning of Flower Culture and the Progress It Has Made Both in This Country and Abroad During the Last Century,” (April 11, 1904).

making 35 present. The cost to each person was 25 cents, and the club treasury appears to have taken in a small surplus over the cost of the rail car. The next May, the Plant Club made an expedition to the Arboretum, and the members were welcomed by their friend, Professor Sargent. The club secretary noted that “the lilacs were in their glory,” but no further details other than the date (May 9) are recorded.

The Plant Club’s expeditions across the Charles were followed by return visits by legendary Arboretum horticulturists. On January 16, 1905, Arboretum Propagator and Superintendent, Jackson Dawson, spoke to the club. In some advance publicity at the meeting before, the club’s president reported that Dr. Goodale had described Mr. Dawson as “the man with the magic touch.” (The president also advised members to bring notebooks to the meeting so as to preserve “each for herself the valuable information” that would be given.) Mr. Dawson did not disappoint. The secretary reported that he spoke for an hour “in a most informal, entertaining manner.” The report of Mr. Dawson’s visit is one of the longest in the record books. Even so, at the end of her report, the secretary noted: “Many more facts of interest were related, but the whole talk was really unreportable.” The reader gets the impression that there was a great deal of method behind Mr. Dawson’s “magic.”

Several years later, the Plant Club got to know Professor John George Jack, noted Arboretum dendrologist, educator and plant explorer. On March 17, 1911, Professor Jack gave a detailed introduction to identifying trees in winter, discussing trunks, branching habits, shapes, bark, twigs, buds (leaf and flower) and more. Like Mr. Dawson, he gave the club’s secretary a good deal to record. After Professor Jack’s talk, the secretary noted that there was a pleasant social hour, during which the speaker answered “many” questions, declaring “he preferred his chocolate cool.”

Professor Jack’s next speaking engagement – also on the subject of tree identification in winter – came on March 1, 1920. He was introduced as “one who knows everything to be known about plants” – this praise from one of the Plant Club’s most knowledgeable horticulturists! To the women who were gathered to hear him, Professor Jack noted that “he was brought up on a fruit farm and his grandfather encouraged his interest in plants, so it came easily to him to have a practical knowledge of growing things.” The author of this paper smiled at Professor Jack’s reference to his grandfather as his horticultural inspiration. He neglected to acknowledge his mother, Annie L. Jack, an early and well-known garden writer, who also raised 11 children.⁵

In 1922, Professor Jack gave a third talk to the Plant Club on oak trees. Before this talk, he recalled that the club’s president had taken his course at the Arboretum 36 years before (in 1886). (She was the MIT graduate mentioned earlier.) As before, the club’s secretary took detailed notes, summing up the talk as “a very instructive and interesting lecture.”

One Arboretum-affiliated scientist who had close ties to the Plant Club, but is not listed among its speakers, was Professor Irving Widmer Bailey. Professor Bailey was an expert in morphological botany, and the beginning of his post-graduate career was in forestry (thanks to the influence of Harvard’s president, Charles Eliot). His father, Professor Solon I. Bailey (Director of the Harvard Astronomical Observatory) was a dedicated gardener, and his mother, Ruth

5 One piece of lore associated with Mrs. Jack, is that upon her marriage to a fruit-farmer, she stipulated that one acre of land be devoted to any department of horticulture she chose, the profits to be her own pocket money.

Bailey,⁶ was a beloved longtime member of the Plant Club, but alas, we cannot count the younger Professor Bailey as a speaker.

Although Irving Bailey did not address the Plant Club, other biological researchers affiliated with the Arboretum did. For example, his close colleague, Professor Ralph H. Wetmore of Harvard, showed four rather technical films on plant growth in April 1933.⁷ As all Arboretum speakers, Professor Wetmore was well received. Said the club secretary: “These films were very unusual and interesting, and it was a privilege to have them shown at this meeting.”

Although the Plant Club’s members were interested in botanical science, they were – at heart – gardeners, serious about improving their horticultural skills. It was in 1936 that the ladies made a wonderful new friend in Dr. Donald Wyman, the Arboretum’s new Horticulturist. In May of that year, he came to Cambridge to speak on flowering shrubs – the topic of his recently completed doctoral work. He showed “fine” colored slides of flowering shrubs – their habits, season of bloom, uses, and their faults and diseases. It was a guest meeting, and Dr. Wyman had a large and appreciative audience. Thirty-eight!

On June 1, the members of the club travelled to the Arboretum, where Dr. Wyman met the ladies and then conducted them through the collection,

“explaining as he went about the pruning of forsythias, the varieties of viburnum, and their merits and faults.” It must have been a splendid day, as the club’s secretary noted that the Arboretum’s azaleas were in gorgeous form, “at the height of their bloom.”

At the time when Dr. Wyman came to know the Plant Club, the members were engaged in a large-scale civic project – the planting of a native-shrub border around the Cambridge Common. The beautification project, launched in 1931 after consultation with landscape architect Warren Manning, was a great source of club pride. On his first visit to the club in Cambridge, Dr. Wyman undoubtedly heard a report about spring-planting plans, and in the Spring of 1937, he sent a gift of 25 shrubs from the Arboretum for the club’s shrub border. (These shrubs were planted by City workers under the club’s supervision.) A vote of thanks to Dr. Wyman is recorded in the club minutes for May 3, 1937.⁸

In 1942, Dr. Wyman sent the City another gift – of 23 crabtrees – in honor of the Plant Club’s work at the Common. At least 14 of the trees were planted along Waterhouse Street which borders the Common on the north side. (A recent site visit shows that two of the crabtrees are still there, though these two survivors may be threatened by a renovation projection that began earlier this year.)

6 Mrs. Bailey, who taught art before her marriage, would likely have been a charter member of the Plant Club in 1889, if she, her husband and young son had not just embarked on a two-year expedition to Peru to find a site and plan a high-mountain observatory for Harvard.

7 The films illustrated: 1. flowers at work with their different parts and functions; 2. the units of root structure, and its relation to its environment, 3. dissemination of seed, and 4. the life of the pea, from seed to complete plant.

8 Dr. Wyman helped the Plant Club in other ways, too. In the 1930s and ’40s, the club was very active in the Garden Club Federation of Massachusetts. In the fall of 1941, the club was responsible for preparing an Identification Contest for the organization’s regional conference. Who better to ask for assistance than Dr. Wyman of the Arboretum? He obliged by preparing jars with the branches of 25 shrubs. (The winner, it should be noted, was a member of the Chestnut Hill Garden Club.)

Meanwhile, the Cambridge Plant Club gained a sister club in 1938. Because the Plant Club had a cap on membership and could only take one or two new members each year, the new club – called the Garden Club – was a welcome addition to the garden scene in Cambridge. Like the older club, the new club included talented horticulturists. Indeed, there was some overlap in the membership of the two clubs. Joint meetings were held from time to time, and a number of speakers got to know each club.

The records of the Garden Club show that some members of the new club knew their way around the Arboretum pretty well. Here is a horticultural aside about the new club that the author of this note cannot resist reporting: In the minutes for October 2, 1940, it is reported that the club's president discussed flowering crabs and cherries grown from fruit picked up under the trees in the Arnold Arboretum. (As proof, she showed fruited branches from her trees.) Apparently, her show-and-tell inspired a group of club members to make an expedition to the Arboretum to collect seedlings. I chuckled to read in the minute book that, at the next meeting, a vote of thanks was given to a trio of club collectors "for going to the Arboretum and collecting small flowering crab and cherry trees for us." Was this plant-collection visit cleared with Dr. Wyman?

In any case, Dr. Wyman came to know the new club at a dinner meeting on March 18, 1946.⁹ After a buffet supper, he gave a talk entitled "Unusual Trees and Shrubs" with colored lantern-slides. The

club secretary noted that Dr. Wyman also included information on hedges – an important topic in neighborhoods like ours where houses are closely spaced. Six weeks later, the Garden Club ventured by carpool to the Arboretum. The club secretary notes, "The flowering crab trees and other fruit trees, shad bushes, early lilacs and azaleas were in beautiful bloom. The weather was fine and the trip seemed to be very much enjoyed." She did not record who from the Arboretum greeted the ladies – or if they dug any seedlings.

The friendship with Dr. Wyman continued. On June 2, 1958, the Plant Club held its final meeting of the season at the Arboretum. Here is the report from the minutes for that day: "After a 'bring your own' picnic lunch in the Administration Building, with dessert and coffee provided, the assemblage made a motor tour of the Arboretum. As Roger Coggeshall [Arboretum Propagator] was not able to be present, the tour was guided by Dr. Wyman, who kindly acted as substitute. Although it was a pouring rainy day and all got very wet, Dr. Wyman was able to show the planting of honey suckles and roses and wisteria. He then led the cavalcade to Joyce Kilmer Park and later showed rhododendron hybrids and _____ tree, the latter no longer in bloom." (Perhaps, Michael Dosmann, the Arboretum's current Curator of the Living Collections, can help the club historian fill in the space, and tell us what kind of tree was no longer in bloom that rainy June day.)

In 1966, the Plant Club and the Garden Club merged, becoming the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club. Along with the clubs' merging of traditions, the Arnold Arboretum and its experts have continued to inspire our efforts in horticulture, landscape art, and forestry (to use Charles Sargent's title language.) Twenty-first century traffic aside, the Riverway that Professor Sargent knew is still the most beautiful

9 This friendship included husbands. The Plant Club's records include a reference to color study photographs of tree flowers taken for the Arboretum by Mr. Alva Morrison, whose wife was a club member. Mrs. Morrison showed the club slides of these photographs on February 6, 1956.

route between the Arboretum, the Charles River, and Cambridge. The successors of the club's friends like Dr. Wyman have kept the history of the Arboretum alive and the present scene vibrant and inviting. Last fall, Arboretum Director, Professor Ned Friedman, spoke to us about his many initiatives at the Arboretum.¹⁰ After Professor Friedman's visit to Cambridge, he arranged for our club to spend a day in Jamaica Plain, celebrating our 125th with lectures, lunch and tours. As I write, the day is fast approaching, and the excitement of club members is building. We look forward to years of connections ahead – and more stories to be told at our next significant anniversary.

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¹⁰ By the way, Professor Friedman addressed us at the same venue – the Cambridge Historical Society where the club has done so much volunteer gardening – that an earlier Arboretum director, Dr. Howard, visited when he addressed the merging Plant Club and Garden Club in 1965.

Arnold Arboretum Speakers, Workshops, Visits, and Gifts, 1889–2014

Plant Club, 1889–1965

- ❖ Charles S. Sargent (Director), “The National Flower” (December 13, 1892)
- ❖ Visit to the Estate of Charles S. Sargent, Holm Lea, Brookline (June 6, 1904)
- ❖ Visit to the Arboretum (May 22, 1905)
- ❖ Jackson Dawson (Propagator and Superintendent), “Cold and Hot Frames” (January 19, 1905)
- ❖ J.G. Jack (Lecturer in Arboriculture), “Studying Trees in Winter” (March 17, 1911)
- ❖ J.G. Jack, “Tree Identification” (March 1, 1920)
- ❖ George C. Wheeler (Graduate Student, Bussey Institute), “Insects Injurious to Vegetation” (March 15, 1920)
- ❖ J.G. Jack, “Oak Trees and Their Insect Enemies” (April 3, 1922)
- ❖ Ralph H. Wetmore (Professor of Botany, Harvard), Four Films on Plant Growth (April 3, 1933)
- ❖ Donald Wyman (Horticulturist), “Flowering Shrubs” (May 4, 1936)
- ❖ Tour of the Arboretum with Donald Wyman (June 1, 1936)
- ❖ Donald Wyman sends a gift of 25 plants to Cambridge from the Arboretum in honor of the Plant Club’s planting work on the Cambridge Common. (Spring 1937)
- ❖ Donald Wyman provides the Plant Club with assistance in preparing branches of shrubs for an identification contest staged for the Fall Metropolitan Regional Conference of the Garden Club Federation of Massachusetts. (October 16, 1941)
- ❖ Donald Wyman gives 23 “crab-trees” to Cambridge for city beautification in recognition of the Plant Club’s work in creating a border around the Common. (Spring 1942)
- ❖ Paul C. Mangelsdorf (Professor of Economic Botany and Director of the Botanical Museum, Harvard), “Increasing the Production of Mexican Food Crops” (joint meeting with the Garden Club, January 9, 1950)
- ❖ Hugh Miller Raup (Director, Harvard Forest, and Bullard Professor in Forestry, Harvard), “Silviculture at the Harvard Forest” (February 4, 1952)
- ❖ Richard A. Howard (Assistant Professor of Biology, Harvard), “Plants of the Caribbean” (March 2, 1953)

- ❖ Picnic and Motor Tour of the Arboretum with Donald Wyman (June 2, 1958)
- ❖ Richard Howard (Director), “Horticultural Impressions of Africa” (February 1, 1965)

Garden Club, 1938–1965

- ❖ Donald Wyman, “Unusual Trees and Shrubs” (March 18, 1946)
- ❖ Expedition to the Arboretum (May 6, 1946)
- ❖ Pilgrimage (with the Garden Club Federation of Massachusetts) through the Arboretum led by Donald Wyman (October 28, 1946)
- ❖ Paul C. Mangelsdorf (Professor of Economic Botany and Director of the Botanical Museum, Harvard), “Increasing the Production of Mexican Food Crops” (joint meeting with the Plant Club, January 9, 1950)
- ❖ Richard Howard (Director), “Horticultural Impressions of Africa” (as guests of the Plant Club, February 1, 1965)

Cambridge Plant & Garden Club, 1966–2014

- ✦ Alfred Fordham (Plant Propagator), “Workshop on the Propagation of Woody Plants” (January 8, 1968)
- ✦ Richard E. Weaver, Jr. (Assistant Curator), “The Spontaneous Flora of Boston” (March 12, 1973)
- ✦ Richard E. Schultes (Jeffrey Professor of Biology and Director of the Botanical Museum, Harvard), “Hallucinogenic Plants of the New World – Past and Present” (January 28, 1975)
- ✦ Alfred J. Fordham, “Shrubs and Trees” (at the Arboretum, April 14, 1975)
- ✦ Gary L. Koller (Curator of Living Collections), “Espaliers as Space Savers” (November 7, 1977)
- ✦ Peter del Tredici (Assistant Plant Propagator), “Plant Propagation with Special Focus on the Germination of the Seeds of Woody Plants” (meeting at Chestnut Hill with the Chestnut Hill Garden Club, April 4, 1983)
- ✦ Peter S. Ashton (Director and Arnold Professor of Botany), “The Arnold Arboretum” (March 4, 1985)
- ✦ Gary L. Koller (Managing Horticulturist), “After Daffodils, What? Or, Planting for Continuous Bloom” (March 3, 1986)
- ✦ Visit to the Arboretum’s Center for Plant Conservation organized by Lizanne Chapin (Volunteer Propagator and CP&GC Member) (January 22, 1990)
- ✦ Jack Alexander (Plant Propagator), “Propagating Native American Plants” (Workshop at the Arboretum, October 11, 1990)
- ✦ “Super Tuesday” Tour of the Arboretum, followed by a picnic under the flowering trees and a viewing of “Garland of Generations,” a slide show about endangered plant species produced by the Arboretum’s Center for Plant Conservation (May 17, 1988)
- ✦ Stephen Spongberg (Horticultural Taxonomist), “The Legacy of ‘Chinese’ Wilson” (February 7, 1994)
- ✦ Gary L. Koller (Managing Horticulturist), “The Garden in Winter” (January 5, 1998)
- ✦ Michael Dosmann (Curator of Living Collections), “Studying Tilia: Tour and Seminar for the Club’s GCA Centennial Tree Project” (at the Arboretum, April 14, 2009)
- ✦ Jack Alexander, “Lilacs” (January 7, 2013)
- ✦ William (Ned) Friedman (Director and Professor of Organismic and Environmental Biology, Harvard), “New Directions at the Arnold Arboretum” (October 7, 2013)
- ✦ Celebration Day at the Arboretum in Honor of the 125th Anniversary of the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club – Symposium, Lunch, and Tours (October 16, 2014)

*List compiled by
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Notes

These lists of Arnold Arboretum speakers and visits were compiled from the records of the Cambridge Plant & Garden Club at the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study Harvard University.

All talks were held in Cambridge unless otherwise noted. Each speaker's Arnold Arboretum title or affiliation is given as it was at the time of the talk. The compiler is grateful to Arnold Arboretum Librarian Larissa Glasser for her help in verifying titles.

