

## **Cultivating Beauty: Ontario Horticultural Societies, 1906-Pesent**

Good afternoon, and thank you for coming today. My favourite part of researching horticultural societies has been seeing how they have admirably responded to local, regional, national, and international events, planting flowers along the way. Originally, society members beautified towns and cities as a means of fostering good, moral citizens. Horticultural Societies also raised their trowels to harvest and reap vegetables throughout two world wars. Many women also filled societies' ranks participating in increased numbers throughout the century. Today, I am going to provide you with an overview of this wonderful history, showcasing the commendable efforts of these societies, who have worked hard to make Ontario beautiful. I feel honoured to stand in front of you and read some of the words of horticultural society members who read those very words during their own speeches throughout the last century. They spoke with such beautiful sentiment and I feel proud to share their story with you today.

Gardens mean many things to many people. To those facing hardships they can be restorative, signifying healing, refuge, and peace; or, they can be commemorative, evoking feelings of sadness, anger, or indebtedness. To immigrants and settlers they are reminders of home, giving us a sense of familiarity and comfort. Gardens can be defiant, created under unlikely and challenging circumstances, offering us hope, respite and repose. Gardens probably meant all of these things to Canadians in some form at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, but they also took on a different meaning: they signified good citizenship, social and moral reform.

From the 1880s to the 1920s, Canada was faced with rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Immigrants concentrated in larger Canadian cities to find employment

opportunities, causing an oversupply in the labour market. This excess led to an increase in unemployment as well as the development of city slums. Existing social welfare institutions, such as local churches, were unable to cope with the social ills that these changes brought. Poverty, crime, prostitution, and political unrest multiplied. In response, Canadians, especially those of the middle class, became engaged in social reform. Garden historian, Edwinna von Baeyer discussed the significance of gardening during this time, stating:

never has the craft of gardening had to bear such heavy psychological, social and moral burdens. Beauty ceased to be the main goal; it now struggled for a place alongside good citizenship, improvement, social remedy, morality, and material progress.<sup>i</sup>

In other words, gardening was used as a means of creating moral citizens and a more just society. Horticultural societies were a product of this reforming zeal and by the 1880s there were horticultural societies in many Ontario cities.

Horticultural societies were initially affiliated with the Fruit Growers' Association and agricultural societies. In the early twentieth century they began to seek their own identity. This move was complicated by resistance from the other groups, who feared the loss of shared funding. In 1906 local societies gathered under the newly formed Ontario Horticultural Association (OHA) with the enactment of the *Horticultural Societies Act*. Their mission was to *keep Ontario beautiful*—a phrase that later became the association's motto and was paraphrased on Ontario license plates in the form of "Ontario Keep it Beautiful." A constitution was created, specifying that any horticultural society was eligible for membership upon the payment of \$2 per year.<sup>ii</sup> Individual societies benefited from joining because they became eligible for grants issued by the provincial government. The association also provided society members with a large support network. Yearly conventions helped delegates form partnerships and gain new ideas. These conventions were very popular, attracting delegates from around the province to engage in

discussions about completed projects, gardening and world events, and visions for the future. These conventions still occur today.

Eight years after the formation of the Ontario Horticultural Association the Great War began. The war resulted in several changes for horticultural societies. Many men between the ages of 18 and 45 enlisted for service. Even greater numbers joined the world stage after conscription was enacted by the 1917 *Military Service Act*, popularly known as the conscription act. Such a large loss of men had a very noticeable impact on society. For horticultural societies these numbers were reflected in decreased memberships. For instance, the Simcoe Horticultural Society faced years of dormancy between 1913 and 1921.<sup>iii</sup>

To help with war efforts, horticultural societies urged members to produce food. Backyard gardening, also known as victory gardening, became a patriotic way for citizens to help feed Canadian and Allied soldiers. Vacant Lot gardening was also initiated during this period. Empty lots within cities were transformed into victory gardens. These gardens helped produce large quantities of food and also furthered beautification efforts. 1917 vacant lot gardening in Toronto produced \$40,000 worth of food, a figure of over \$650,000 today.<sup>iv</sup> These and a plethora of other local, provincial, and national initiatives showed the desire of everyday citizens to pull together for the war effort. However big or small the contribution, Canadians, including many horticultural society members, worked hard to feed both Canadian and Allied soldiers.

Although food production was a chief concern during wartime, several society members spoke about the importance of gardening as a means of healing war-related stresses of both civilians and returned soldiers. During the 1917 Ontario Horticultural Association convention, President Dr. Bennett, stated:

In spite of war flowers bloom, trees burst into leaf and harvests ripen and are reaped, and it is so because flowers are the agencies used to renew life in the heart of the world and keep life sweet. It is what our boys want when they return from war to obliterate the memory of their struggles and to renew their lives upon tender and helpful lines. By all means let them come back to a country filled with nature's beauty.<sup>v</sup>

This beautiful sentiment was echoed by society members throughout the country, showing that gardening was not just about fostering morality and good citizenship. It could also be used to provide respite for those facing hardships, like war.

After the war ended, horticultural society memberships skyrocketed. By 1920 there were 115 societies with 28,028 members, compared with the pre-war figure of 14,000 members in 1913.<sup>vi</sup> Increased membership was due to the rebounding economy and increased leisure time after war time efforts ceased. But, it could also be said that people, in part, were turning to gardening to heal after years of conflict, heartbreak, sacrifice, and struggle.

Shortly after the war ended, the Ontario Horticultural Association elected Mary Yates, its first female president in 1921. Her election was a remarkable feat for women gardeners throughout the province, in part because 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century professionalization of the horticultural field made it more difficult for women to meaningfully participate. Women have fought to regain their place in the field ever since. To prove this point, a 1914 article entitled, "Home Gardens and the Homemakers," written by Mrs. R.B. Potts for the Ontario Horticultural Association's annual report talks about women removing barriers in the field, she stated:

Horticulture has been deemed a masculine profession and women were by many signs to keep out of this field, being assured most solemnly that it was much too strenuous for the weaker vessels of humanity to stand...the very warnings did but to prove attractions to feminine minds, and the signs so carefully posted as danger signals were considered things to be treated as targets to be practiced upon..."<sup>vii</sup>

The early women involved in horticultural societies were defiant. They belonged to a man's world, planting flowers and digging holes where they were not supposed to. As Mrs. Potts stated, the barriers to the field acted as signposts to be shot down and run through by strong women with trowels and hoes.

Although women were actively participating in societies, it would be many years before they graduated from horticultural schools in large numbers. But, they had to start somewhere. The election of Mary Yates is just one example of women succeeding in the horticultural field, and I feel proud to say that there were several other successful women during this period; some of whom are highlighted in the exhibit's labels. It would take another 20 years for another woman, Mrs. D.W. Boucher, to be elected as president.<sup>viii</sup>

Beautification projects continued in full force during the 1920s; however, the 1929 Great Depression made such projects more difficult. Grant allocations decreased. By 1933, the Ontario Horticultural Association was given \$5,000, which was \$35,000 less than what was offered in 1930.<sup>ix</sup> The following year they were given \$12,000, a little more than the year before, but still not in keeping with pre-depression numbers. Although this proved to be a difficult economic time, societies did not feel a loss of spirits. In 1930, J. Lockie Wilson, the Ontario Horticultural Association's Superintendent stated:

the spirit of our membership is not dimmed by the depression that prevails throughout the world to-day, and it is pleasing to note that we are still progressing. Ever onward we forward press, and we have hitched our wagon to the morning star.<sup>x</sup>

With this bolstered spirit, horticultural societies continued with their projects, working even harder with limited resources, beautifying cities that were in need of aesthetic enhancement and a morale boost. To provide an example, relief gardens for the unemployed were first discussed at a

1933 Hamilton Horticultural Society annual meeting.<sup>xi</sup> This was such a popular and successful project that the Simcoe and District Horticultural Society spoke of it years later in their 1940 annual report stating how Hamilton's "unemployed gardens" decreased levels of crime and ill health.<sup>xii</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s many women joined horticultural societies. So many in fact, that Lockie Wilson included a paragraph about them in his 1930 convention address, stating that he was "pleased to note that ladies represented half of this great gathering. What a gratifying comparison with 1906."<sup>xiii</sup> Here, he was referring to the 1 female out of the 16 delegates who attended the first convention. He went on to explain that:

With this delightful increase in the number of our fair lady delegates with their enthusiastic, cordial and earnest support, surely 'the glory of the garden shall never pass away.'<sup>xiv</sup>

Women also commented on their increased numbers. In 1933 Mrs. J.A. Wilson explained the benefit of women society members by stating:

Many Horticultural Societies have women directors. All should have them as they are trained in the many Societies to conduct business meetings, realize the needs of the smaller gardener, have good taste in the choice of plants, are economical purchasers, and moreover, have time to devote to Society affairs.<sup>xv</sup>

This quotation paints us a mental picture of the kinds of work and activities that women were doing during this time period. It also shows us that being a good gardener or horticultural society member did not just come from having a formal horticultural education. These activities, like running a household, provided women with numerous skills that allowed them to successfully hold executive positions in horticultural societies. Despite increased participation from both men

and women, the 1930s proved difficult for horticultural societies. These troubles would only increase with the start of the Second World War in September of 1939.

Throughout the course of the Second World War, 1.1 million men enlisted for service, out of a population of approximately 11 million. This figure made up roughly 10% of the entire population, but 40% of men between the ages of 18 and 45. Much like with the First World War, this resulted in a decreased membership for horticultural societies, but not a loss in morale. Society members created and tended victory gardens in order to provide food for Canadian soldiers and Allied troops. They also participated in other wartime initiatives, like Red Cross and canteen support. During 1942 alone, horticultural societies donated \$866.85 (\$1,358 today) to the Seeds for Britain program in order to send seeds to Allied soldiers and prisoners of war.<sup>xvi</sup> The president of the St. George Horticultural Society received a letter from her son, a prisoner-of-war, which stated that, “the boys at his camp had garden plots and they were enjoying tomatoes, lettuce and radishes.”<sup>xvii</sup>

After the Second World War gardening became increasingly popular. People began to move out of the city into the suburbs, where they had larger plots of land, and subsequently began cultivating gardens. Garden historian, Carol Martin stated that gardening was popular in the 1950s as a direct result of Second World War victory gardening.<sup>xviii</sup> There were many reasons for an increased interest in gardening. This interest invigorated horticultural society membership numbers in the immediate post-war years.

Enthusiasm, however, soon waned, and by 1957 horticultural society numbers were down by 8,000 compared with their 1930 figures. In the 1957 presidential address, Dr. Bryce Kendrick acknowledged this decrease and tried to raise morale by eloquently stating that he “did not know

of a public service organization which can contribute more to the welfare and progress of a community than an active horticultural society” and that, “the beautification of this grand province of Ontario will never be finished.”<sup>xix</sup> This loss in numbers was speculated to be the result of many new clubs and activities competing for members. Despite this hardship, many new horticultural societies were formed, and beautification projects continued.

Today, there are 280 active horticultural societies. Their ultimate aim of beautification still remains, although they direct their efforts more towards conservation and education rather than moral improvement. This change in direction was demonstrated during the 1989 convention titled, “The Environment-Let’s Face the Facts.” President Gordon Winter stated:

It is the responsibility of all of us to give more consideration to our practices which affect the environment. Let us be determined to compost, to reduce waste, to eliminate the use of unnecessary chemicals and to practice sustainable horticulture in all of its phases.”<sup>xx</sup>

In subsequent years, horticultural societies’ environmental conservation projects went beyond just using best practices; instead, their activities took on a more proactive approach to help stave off declining populations and environmental change. For instance, just this year the Ontario Horticultural Association is building a pollinator garden at Queen’s Park in Toronto to help with declining bee populations. Many individual societies have also created similar gardens in their towns and cities.

Although conservation became a chief concern, horticultural societies today also participate in many other types of projects. For instance, members commemorate important provincial, national, and world events. Recently, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge was honoured and remembered with various plantings around the province.

So how does the Burlington Horticultural Society fit into this history? Did they follow the same trajectory? Did they cultivate beautiful landscapes? What kinds of projects did they do? This next section of my presentation will look at the Burlington Horticultural Society's great work with a focus on some of their many beautification projects.

The City of Burlington has a rich horticultural history. The first horticultural organization, the Burlington Horticultural Association, was founded in 1889. This group differed from horticultural societies because its member focused on agriculture rather than beautification. The Association contributed largely to the agricultural field exhibiting fruit at the 1896 Chicago's World Fair; the 1900 Paris and Glasgow expos; and at the 1901 Pan-American in Buffalo.<sup>xxi</sup>

The Burlington Horticultural Society was founded on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1919, several months after the closing of the Great War. Reverend Tebbs, former president of the Ontario Horticultural Association and Burlington resident, was surprised by the fact that his city did not have a horticultural society. An early report about the society's origins explained that, "some of our prominent citizens have for some time past been of the opinion that our town could be made much more beautiful if there was some organization in existence such as a horticultural society..."<sup>xxii</sup> Twenty-five members were present at the society's first meeting. Their immediate objectives included: beautifying vacant street corners; placing flowerbeds at the entrance to the town; assisting citizens in procuring plants and seeds; and setting up lectures on practical horticulture topics.

Reverend Tebbs became the first president and Mary Townsend became the first Secretary-Treasurer, making her the first woman to hold an executive position with the Burlington Society. Although it was uncommon for women to hold executive positions, many

joined as members and positively contributed to the society's successes. Today, the executive is almost always exclusively made up of women, showcasing women's persistence and successes in the field.

The Burlington Horticultural Society was responsible for maintaining public parks until the 1940s. Taking care of the parks was a welcomed challenge by members. Several parks were created during the society's early years, including Gore Park and Brant Park. One particularly keen member, Spencer Smith, worked to create Lakeside Park, a popular park on Burlington's waterfront. Spencer Smith owned a grocery store and it is safe to say was a beautification enthusiast. Local journalist Linda Jacobs stated that, "the story of...Spencer Smith is a lovely one. It's the story of a very common man who worked uncommonly hard and who happened to be uncommonly nice." She went on to comment about his love of making things beautiful, explaining that, "once he established order [at his store] Mr. Smith started to beautify the back alley behind his shop. His garbage cans wouldn't just stand there cluttering up the alley for everyone else to look at...so he built a trellis and grew vines around and over the cans."<sup>xxiii</sup>

The park later had its name changed to Spencer Smith Park to reflect Spencer's hard work and dedication to making Burlington an even more beautiful place to live. In recognition of his efforts a cairn was erected at the park letting those passing by know that it was, "[E]rected by the Burlington Horticultural Society in honour and memory of Spencer Smith for his outstanding contribution and leadership in the Beautification of Burlington."<sup>xxiv</sup> Sadly, Spencer Smith passed away in 1955, but not before leaving a wonderful legacy and a place for Burlington residents to enjoy for years to come.

During the Second World War horticultural societies throughout the province participated in war time activities- namely, planting victory gardens and maintaining beautification efforts.

Going through the Burlington Society's meeting minutes for this period I only found one document commenting on the war. Mr. Bennett, "stressed the importance of flower and vegetable gardens as a relaxation hobby and as an antidote in these times of "war nerves." The same report explained that the society also contributed a donation of \$5.00 (a little over \$70.00 today) to the Seeds of Britain project that was undertaken by the Ontario Horticultural Association.<sup>xxv</sup> Considering that Mr. Bennett spoke about the importance of gardening during war time and the society worked to raise money for war efforts, it can be speculated that they did participate in victory gardening, as this was a very large and popular project heavily championed by the Ontario Horticultural Association.

School beautification was important to society members. A 1956 report shows that the Burlington Society planted tulip bulbs at four public schools and expected to plant at the separate schools, as well.<sup>xxvi</sup> Planting flowers along school buildings was an easy way to instill good citizenship in young children, teaching them the importance of beautification as well as making them feel proud of their city. School beautification projects were done in an attempt to get children interested in horticulture, with the hopes that they will one day be society members.

The Honour Roll of Trees was, and still is, another project Burlington citizens feel proud of. The Honour Roll project was initially started by the Ontario Forestry Association as a way to celebrate the 1967 centenary. Several years later in 1975, the Burlington Horticultural Society, in partnership with the City of Burlington and Royal Botanical Gardens, started their own Honour Roll. Society members catalogued city trees that had a particular distinction, such as size, age, historical background, or rarity. To date, the Burlington Horticultural Society has catalogued 110 trees, with the oldest one reported to being over 300 years old.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Other successful projects, like the Civic Rose Awards, had citizens beautifying their lawns, encouraging civic pride. The society donated \$1000 dollars to the new central library after it was built to fund the rose garden. To this date, they still donate money yearly to the library to purchase books about gardening. The society is still very active today, beautifying the city of Burlington for all to enjoy.

As can be seen, the Burlington Horticultural Society has been a large force behind making Burlington what it is today. Several parks were initiated by the group and they worked hard throughout their history to make Burlington a beautiful place to live. Their beautification projects also fostered civic improvement and pride. This group is still very active today, working hard to keep Burlington--and Ontario—beautiful.

If you are interested in learning more about the Burlington Horticultural society, or any other horticultural society, you can come to our archive at Royal Botanical Gardens.

I recently put together a large collection on Canadian horticultural societies, which includes documents from 66 individual societies. We have the Burlington society's newspaper clippings, newsletters, and flower show programmes from 1976-2004. If you are interested in looking at any of this material please come and talk to me after the presentation or feel free to contact us. Also, if you have any old society ephemera and are interested in donating it, please let us know. We are always happy to accept new donations. The Burlington Public Library also has many early meeting minutes, correspondence, and newspaper clipping.

I would like to thank the BPL for hosting us this afternoon. And special thank you to the library's service librarian, Benjamin Peddle for helping me locate and navigate this collection and thank you to Michelle and other staff for setting up this event.

## In Conclusion

Ontario horticultural societies have a rich and productive history. They cultivated many of our beautiful Ontario landscapes. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gardening took on an elite pursuit, namely, beautifying for the sake of creating moral and just citizens. As time went on, societies began to focus more on conservation and education rather than moral reform. We can thank them for many beautification projects which brighten our towns, put smiles on our faces, and make us proud of our landscapes, communities, and heritage. The way that we perceive our surrounding environment has been largely shaped by their activities. Many of our beautiful parks, tree-lined streets, and flower beds are a direct result of their efforts. Next time you are at one of these sites, I hope that you take a moment to reflect upon the history I told you today and appreciate the efforts of these wonderful groups.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup>Edwinna von Baeyer, *Rhetoric and Roses: A History of Canadian Gardening* (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984), 2-3.

<sup>ii</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>iii</sup>William Yeager, *A Century of Gardening: Simcoe and District Horticultural Society* (Simcoe: Simcoe Horticultural Society, 1996), 42.

<sup>iv</sup>J. Lockie Wilson, "Report of the Superintendent," *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Horticultural Societies for the Year 1918* (Toronto: Department of Agriculture, 1919), 19.

<sup>v</sup>Dr. Bennett, "President's Address," *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Horticultural Societies for the Year 1918* (Toronto: Department of Agriculture, 1919), 7.

<sup>vi</sup>J. Lockie Wilson, "Report of the Superintendent," *Eight Annual Report of the Horticultural Societies of Ontario for the Year 1913*. (Toronto: Department of Agriculture, 1914), 12; Philip F. Dodds and H.E. Markle. *The Story of Ontario Horticultural Societies, 1854-1973*, 63.

<sup>vii</sup>Mrs. R.B. Potts, "Home Gardens and the Homemaker," *The Ninth Annual Report of the Horticultural Societies of Ontario for the Year 1914* (Toronto: Department of Agriculture, 1915), 76.

<sup>viii</sup>Philip F. Dodds and H.E. Markle. *The Story of Ontario Horticultural Societies, 1854-1973*, 113.

<sup>ix</sup>J. Lockie Wilson, "Report of Superintendent J. Lockie Wilson," *Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the Horticultural Societies for the Year 1930* (Toronto: Department of Agriculture, 1931), 8.

<sup>x</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>xi</sup>Editorial Committee, *Hamilton Horticultural Society: Centennial Yearbook and Garden Guide, 1850-1950* (Hamilton: Hamilton Horticultural Society, 1950), 15.

<sup>xii</sup>Yeager, *A Century of Gardening: Simcoe and District Horticultural Society*, 79.

<sup>xiii</sup>J. Lockie Wilson, "Report of Superintendent J. Lockie Wilson," *Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the Horticultural Societies for the Year 1930* (Toronto: Department of Agriculture, 1931) 7.

<sup>xiv</sup>*Ibid.*

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<sup>xv</sup>Mrs. J.A. Wilson, "Women in Horticulture," *Twenty-eight Annual Report of the Horticultural Societies for the Year 1933* (Toronto: Department of Agriculture, 1934), 37.

<sup>xvi</sup>Dodds and Markle, *The Story of Ontario Horticultural Societies, 1854-1973*, 116.

<sup>xvii</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>xviii</sup>Carol Martin, *A Century of Canadian Gardening* (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2000), 130-133.

<sup>xix</sup>Bryce Kendrick, "President's Address," *104<sup>th</sup> Annual Report: Ontario Horticultural Societies, 1957* (Toronto: Department of Agriculture, 1957), 8.

<sup>xx</sup>Gordon Winter, "The President's Message," *Ontario Horticultural Association Report-The Environment: Let's Face Fact*, 1989, 4.

<sup>xxi</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>xxii</sup>Burlington Horticultural Society, "Organization of Burlington Horticultural Society," undated, Burlington Public Library's Burlington Horticultural Society Collection.

<sup>xxiii</sup>Linda Jacobs, "A Common Man, Uncommonly Nice," c. 1980s. unknown local paper

<sup>xxiv</sup>Cairn at Spencer Smith Park.

<sup>xxv</sup>Burlington Horticultural Society, Annual Meeting Minutes, January 22, 1943, Burlington Public Library's Burlington Horticultural Society Collection.

<sup>xxvi</sup>Burlington Horticultural Society report, October 30, 1956, Burlington Public Library's Burlington Horticultural Society Collection.

<sup>xxvii</sup>Burlington Horticultural Society, 1983 Burlington Historical Society Newsletter, "The History of the Burlington Horticultural Society," <https://www.burlingtonhs.com/index.php/history/> (accessed February 28, 2018)