



Working CLUB

*Garden Club Members Get
Dirt Under Their Nails*

By Kathie Stamps
Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt

There's something intensely satisfying about a tactile connection with nature: rich soil between the fingers, a hot sun beating down on the neck, the sweet ache in the lower back, the familiarity of a favorite tool digging up just the right spot to plant a seedling. These contented sensations, not to mention camaraderie and history, are what motivate the 60 members of the Garden Club of Lexington as they maintain the garden at Ashland, the Henry Clay Estate.

Working CLUB

Every Wednesday morning from March through November, club members tend to the half-acre garden on the grounds of the former statesman's home on Sycamore Road off Richmond Road. They plant, prune, weed, and nurture the beautiful flowers, shrubs, and herbs of the garden, which attracts thousands of visitors each year. While the plethora of colors, textures, and aromas of Mother Nature's glory may appear native and natural, it takes plenty of human effort.

"This isn't your grandmother's garden club," said club officer

Martha Nicol. "People think it's a grandmother's tea party, but it's lots of work."

"We don't have long fingernails," said past president Ginny May.

"Most of us have terrible-looking hands," admitted Nicol.

In the early days physical labor didn't play much of a part with the club's efforts to beautify the city. The Garden Club of Lexington was begun in 1916 by 12 women, ardent gardeners who raised money for the war efforts in the early years of World



Garden Club members are each assigned a parterre to tend. The parterres contain coral bells, herbs, holly, lacebark elm, roses, and sweet bay.



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— Martha Nicol, club officer



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War I. They sold plants, vegetables, flowers, and shrubs to make contributions to the Red Cross.

The club's first civic project was donating an alley of trees along the Richmond Road median. The group also donated trees to Transylvania University and four county schools.

In 1924 the club joined the Garden Club of America (GCA), which had been established the previous year. By the 1930s Lexington's club was urging farm owners to retain their rock



The Garden Club maintains the garden for Ashland, the Henry Clay Estate.



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Left, the peony garden draws many admirers in late April and early May. Topiary, above, is another attraction.

fences, some of which were being destroyed. They organized the rehabilitation of the Episcopal cemetery on East Third Street and supported efforts to eliminate billboards on the state's highways.

Then, in 1950, the Henry Clay Memorial Foundation opened Ashland to the public and asked the garden club to establish the garden. Simple task? No. It evoked controversy and threatened to split the club.

Little is known of Henry and Lucretia Clay's original garden in the early 1800s, except that it was filled with trees and shrubs. In 1900 Clay's granddaughter, Anne Clay McDowell, restored about half of the garden on the original site. Decades of neglect

ensued. When the Garden Club of Lexington was charged with its task, members were torn between re-creating what had once been there and designing a new garden from scratch. By a narrow margin, the club voted to build a new garden just off the remains of the old one.

Landscape architect Henry Fletcher Kenney of Cincinnati designed a formal garden in six parterres (decorative squares or rectangular patterns). Today each garden club member is assigned, on a rotating basis, to a particular parterre: coral bells, herbs, holly, lacebark elm, roses, and sweet bay. Heirloom perennials, annuals, fruit trees, boxwoods, and statues and sculptures abound throughout the garden.

"It's a true feast for the eyes," said Ann Hagan-Michel, Ashland's executive director.

The garden inspires artists of all kinds and provides a quiet place for people to read or study. "And countless marriage proposals have taken place there," said Hagan-Michel.

In 1986 the club created a peony garden at the rear of the main garden. Dozens of Saunders hybrid peonies were donated by Bobbi Van Meter in honor of her mother, Alice McIlvain Pre-witt, owner of Walmac Farm and a member of the garden club.

When the peonies bloom in late April or early May, people come out of the woodwork to stroll through them.

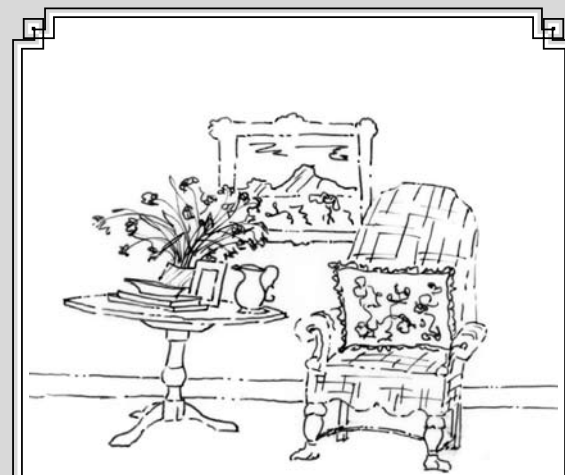
"The blooms are so intense they stop traffic," said Hagan-Michel, as the bursts of color are quite visible from Sycamore Road.

Another delightful feature of the Ashland garden is a set of life-sized topiaries. The vine-covered figures, depicting a Victorian family of four, were donated in 1998 by the children of garden club member Dot Hillenmeyer Crutcher, who celebrates her 90th birthday in April. Dot's daughter, Dottie Cordray, is also a club member, as is Dot's niece Betsy Hillenmeyer and grand-niece Amy Hillenmeyer Kessinger.

"One of the most special things is the multi-generational mix of this garden club," said May. "There are mentors to the younger members. It's just fun to be down on your knees with someone's mother."

Other relative sets include president Jessica Bell Nicholson, her sister Benny Bell Williams, and their mother Jessica Bell. Lida Givens' daughters, Martha Nicol and immediate past president Ellen Chapman, are members. Alma Headley Haggin, whose father was a co-founder of Keeneland, died in January at the age of 96. Her daughter Mo Ethington, daughter-in-law Bettie Bos and granddaughters Gay Van Meter and Martie Broad-bent Mayer are carrying on her tradition of being a member of the garden club.

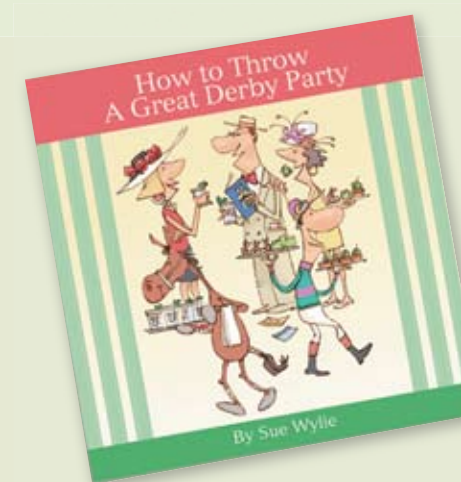
The youngest member is in her early 30s; the oldest is Harriett Holladay, who turned 100 last July. To raise funds for the club years ago, Holladay illustrated the 1964 book *The Cat Who Lives at Ashland*, about a calico cat named Gypsy who roamed the Ashland estate. It was written by club member Louisiana Wood Simpson (who was married to Henry Clay's great-great-



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grandson Henry Clay Simpson). Simpson died last September at age 97.

“Our older members are really well known for what they know about plants, conservation, and horticulture,” said Nicol, current awards chairman and past conservation committee chair for the club. “It’s a real blessing to work side by side with them. When I joined, (then-member) Irma Johnson knew every Latin name for every plant.”

“*Eupatorium!*” squealed president Jessica Nicholson. “I’ll never forget that.” *Eupatorium* is a genus of 40 species of annuals, perennials, and shrubs.

Nicol reminisced about Irma Johnson, who died last December at age 96. “She would buy Dixie cups and put seedlings from her home, propagated from someone else, and give them out. I have plants in my garden that were started by her.”

One of the things Nicol loves about this club is that the older women are a wealth of knowledge. “And they’re entertaining,” she said.

“The garden is our gift to the community.”

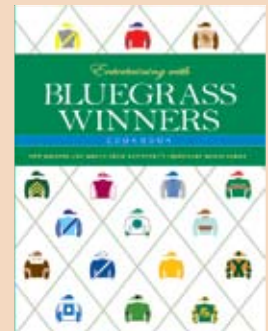
— Barbara Young, club past president



Members Joan Gaines, left, and Jessica Bell at work in the garden

THEY COOK, TOO

In 1999 the Garden Club of Lexington published a cookbook to fund maintenance of the garden at Ashland, the Henry Clay Estate. *Bluegrass Winners* has sold more than 100,000 copies since its first printing. The club’s second cookbook, released in January 2008, is *Entertaining with Bluegrass Winners Cookbook: New Recipes and Menus from Kentucky’s Legendary Horse Farms*, published by Eclipse Press, with farm histories written by Edward L. Bowen. The cookbook is divided into favorite Southern menus for spring, summer, fall, and winter, provided by horse farms from Adena Springs to Xalapa Farm and everything in between (Calumet, Claiborne, Donamire, Gainesway, Keeneland, Kentucky Horse Park, Three Chimneys Farm, and many others). Lighter recipes for spring include olive-nut sandwiches, fried green tomatoes, and lemon pudding. The cookbook is for sale at book-sellers locally and online.



Members include professional women, several farm owners, and others who have a passion for the club’s different divisions: gardening, horticulture, flower arranging, and conservation.

“It’s a time commitment,” said Chapman, who has a bachelor of science in horticulture from the University of Kentucky. “It’s hard to find people who are able to adjust their schedules.”

Several members are master gardeners through UK’s Cooperative Extension Service. Nicholson is a master gardener and approved judge of flower arranging for the Garden Club of America. She travels the country to judge flower shows.

Through the conservation efforts, the club is protecting the running buffalo clover (*Trifolium stoloniferum*), a federally protected species of clover found in only a handful of states, including Kentucky. The club also works hard at removal of invasive plants.

“We’re working to be as green as we can,” said May. “We have a compost pile we add to and use. We try not to use a lot of chemicals.”

The garden at Ashland, the club’s ongoing project, is a true testament of passion and dedication. The members of the Garden Club of Lexington are ensuring a present and future communion with nature. Said past president Barbara Young, “The garden is our gift to the community.” 🦋