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Women's History Month: Remembering the Women's Land Army of America



By Lesley Parness
Columnist

Everyone knows Rosie the Riveter. Her forearms and fetching hair wrap are ingrained on our collective memories as part of American women's contribution to World War II. But how many know about the Women Land's Army of America?

The Woman's Land Army of America (WLAA) was a civilian organization created during World War I to work in American agriculture, replacing men called up to the military. In 1917, as American men left for the front, the government became concerned about the drastic reduction in farm labor. Officials quickly recognized that this would have serious consequences for the nation's food production.

The WLAA was modeled on the British Women's Land Army, aka the Land Girls or Land Lassies. The WLAA was established by a consortium of women's organizations – including gardening clubs, suffrage societies, women's colleges, and civic groups.

It is a fascinating example of women mobilizing themselves and challenging conventional thinking about gender roles a full generation before Rosie flexed her biceps.

Operating from 1917 to 1919, the WLAA organized in 42 states, and employed more than 20,000 women, known as "farmerettes," a term akin to "suffragettes." Harriet Stanton Blatch, (daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton,

a leading figure in the suffragette movement) became Director of the WLAA in 1917.

Most of the women of WLAA had never worked on farms before. Consisting primarily of college students, teachers, and secretaries, they were paid equally with male farm laborers (50 cents per hour), had an eight-hour workday, and (gasp) wore pants! They operated on regional and state levels with Community and Single Farm Units managed by Captains who oversaw daily productivity.

The WLAA did not receive government funding. Often, universities and women's colleges initiated the lead, and promoted their own WLAA land units. Barnard College established and ran an agricultural training program on their 680-acre farm. Vassar College's 740-acre farm provided land for students to cultivate and to train on. By 1918, 15,000 women across 20 states had participated in agricultural training and education programs.

In 1918, the WLAA published "Help for the Farmer," offering a list of the agricultural skills women could do: "ploughing, planting, cultivating, thinning, weeding, harvesting, sorting, and packing for market, mowing, hay raking and pitching, hauling lumber and dairy work."

In spite of physical hardships, WLAA morale was high. "Would you quit?" a reporter asked the farmerettes – "No, soldiers don't." Will you get up at 5:30 in the morning? "Yes!" Will you muster for inspection, line up for exercise drills, and (Cont. on Page 19)

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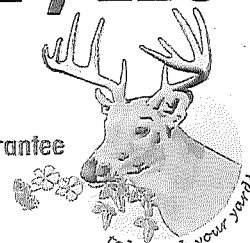
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Let's Go...to GCNJ District Flower Shows

By Jeannie Geremia
Contributing Writer

The year 2020 offers gardeners and the general public so many opportunities throughout the year to participate and view flower shows throughout the Garden State.

Sure, we miss the New Jersey Flower and Garden Show that took place at the NJ Expo Center in the middle of February since 2003. We all have wonderful and hilarious memories of The Garden Club of New Jersey's fabulous Standard Flower Show being the centerpiece of this joyous springtime in February extravaganza.

It was always a challenge with weather, Valentine's Day and unexpected glitches keeping us on our toes, but all things come to an end and we are thrilled with turning this one big flower show into four District Flower Shows that will be staged in North, Central and South Jersey, and encompassing different growing seasons.

The Garden Club of New Jersey, Inc. is comprised of eight Districts throughout our state, 100-plus garden clubs, and a membership totaling 4,500 members. We decided to combine several of our Districts so that our members can share responsibilities, workshops, ideas and form lasting relationships and friendships throughout our great state.

The first District Flower Show is coming up fast so please mark your calendars. The Central Jersey District IV and District V garden clubs have partnered to present a National Garden Clubs Standard Flower Show entitled "Let's Go..." to be held on Saturday, April 25, 2020 from 12:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. at Shady Rest (Scotch Hills Country Club), 820 Jerusalem Road, Scotch Plains, N.J. 07076, free and open to the public.

They are working hard to finalize their tantalizing and fun schedule, which is the law of the show and contains all the information

that exhibitors need to know in order to participate on a fair and equal basis.

This Flower Show is being held at my favorite time of year, heading into mid-spring when our gardens are filled to brimming with tulips, daffodils, hyacinths, bluebells, hepaticas, bleeding hearts, dutchmen's breeches, dogtooth violets, oh, be still my heart! I'm rapturous already as to what fabulous horticulture will be on display!

The theme "Let's Go" was purposefully chosen to lead exhibitors and the viewing public in all kinds of directions including "...the Growing Fields of Holland," "...Buck Gardens," "...the Conservatory" in the Horticulture Division, and "Enjoying Culinary Delights with "...dining in Chinatown," "...with a Trip to Little Italy," "...In My Secret Garden," and off to "...At the Circus," then onto "...Far Away Places" and "Paris in the Springtime," "The Magic of Disney World," and "Hawaiian Paradise." Whew, such fun!

More to follow with BotanicalArts, a new Division that opens up Horticulture to new possibilities and this District Flower Show has chosen to feature Dried and Preserved Plant Material besides showcasing the popular botanical jewelry, decorated birdhouses and photography! Youth will enjoy displaying their creativity in collages and photography and educating us all with "...where we can lend a helping hand."

District IV & V are fundraising to mount this show and would love your support by purchasing Hellebores that can be ordered by April 1, 2020, with pickup at the Flower Show on April 25. The Hellebores for sale in one-gallon containers are: Helleborus Honeymoon, "Rome in Red," Helleborus Wedding Party, "Blushing Bridesmaid"; Helleborus Wedding, "Party Confetti Cake"; Helleborus Honeymoon, "Spanish

Flare," and Helleborus Wedding Party, "Dark and Handsome." They are \$25 each and will be a great addition to your Hellebore collection! Please contact Teddie Falcone with questions at tlfalcone@comcast.net.

District I, II, and III, our North Jersey garden clubs, not to be outdone, are staging a Small Standard Flower Show on Tuesday, September 1, 2020 at Christ the King Church, 16 Blue Mill Road, New Vernon, with a show entitled "Following in Her Footsteps," an homage to Vita Sackville-West, Gertrude Jekyll and Rosemary Verey. How inspirational is that?!

District VIII stands alone as it includes all our Jersey shore clubs and is bursting with 25 clubs and counting. They have settled on staging their District Flower Show on Friday, September 25, 2020 and Saturday, September 26, 2020 at the Presbyterian Church Hall on Sycamore Avenue in Shrewsbury, N.J. They are still hard at work on schedule theme, so more to come.

District VI and District VII, our South Jersey garden clubs, are busy bees working on a Standard Flower Show schedule entitled "Dancing with Flowers" to be held on Friday, April 9, 2021 and Saturday, April 10, 2021 at Morven Museum and Garden at 55 Stockton Street, Princeton, N.J. with workshops and fundraisers pending.

Be prepared to be "WOWED" by all these District Flower Shows and look for your local garden club flower shows and ENJOY!

Editor's note: Jeannie Geremia is The Garden Club of New Jersey, Inc. President, and a National Garden Clubs, Inc. Master Flower Show Judge for the GCNJ. Jeannie is a member of Neshanic Garden Club, and the Raritan Township Historic Committee. Jeannie's email address is: jgeremia42@gmail.com

Women's History Month: Remembering the Women's Land Army of America

(Continued from page 1)

eat the rations served without complaint? "Yes!" came the reply. They signed the pledge forms and joined in a rousing cheer: Don't be a slacker, Be a picker or a packer, WLAA, Rah, rah, rah!

Initially, farmers did not look favorably on employing women in agricultural work. Women had farmed alongside men, but as wives and daughters, not as hired hands. Many felt that these women would not be able to cope with the difficult working conditions on a farm.

However, the farmerettes of the WLAA proved to be capable and successful and soon won over their skeptics. Farmers became the WLAA's loudest champions, and the farmerette was celebrated as an icon of American women's patriotism and pluck.

Several New Jersey women played a strong role in the story of the WLAA. In Morristown, Dorothy Miller Post continued the family tradition of community service as Captain of the Morris County WLAA Unit. Dolly, as she was known, along with the Garden Club of Morristown, helped support the unit by providing training and financial resources. Her home is now Macculough Hall.

In Far Hills, Martha Brookes Hutcheson, one of America's first licensed landscape architects, trained young women in agricultural practices on her property, Merchiston Farm. There women grew rye, wheat, fruits and vegetables and husbanded pigs, poultry, sheep and dairy cows. In this way Hutcheson's vision for landscape design to serve a social agenda was brought to fruition. The property, now Bamboo Brook, is part of the Morris County Park System.

From 1917 to 1920, the WLAA sent more than 20,000 urban women into rural America to take over farm work. It was a civilian enterprise organized and financed by women who insisted on fair labor practices. It taught women agricultural skills and leadership and management techniques.

The WLAA also touched on some of the most significant social issues of the 20th century - sexual and class distinctions and discriminations. When World War I ended in 1918, many within the organization wanted to continue the program. But financial difficulties prevailed and in 1920, the organization was disbanded.

For the next Women's History Month, we'll focus on the WLA of WWII, in which 3.5 million women rolled up their sleeves to support the war effort. The story includes women as disparate as Eleanor Roosevelt and Helena Rubenstein. I call them Soil Sisters. Do you know any?

Please contact me if you do. Perhaps your mom, an aunt, friend or neighbor was a farmerette in WWII. I'd love to meet them and find out about their experiences. The "Greatest Generation" included quite a few great gardeners.

Editor's Note: Lesley Parness has taught horticulture and environmental education around the world for the past four decades. Retired from her post as Superintendent of Horticultural Education at the Morris County Park Commission, her focus now is garden history and botanic literature. She is a past President and Founding Member of the Garden State Gardens Consortium, and a member of the Herb Society of America and The Council on Horticultural and Botanic Libraries. Lesley lectures throughout the tri-state area. She can be reached at www.lesleyparness.com, where a complete listing of her presentations and workshops may be found. This column will appear in the paper every other month.