

Dig into Reading this Summer! (continued...)

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In the Sam Bridge greenhouse this spring

In 2007, one of our Oral History Project interviewers set out to dig into the Westchester Fairfield Horticultural Society, an illustrious Greenwich institution going back to 1910. Our interviewer began by seeking out Samuel Bridge, Jr. and his daughter, Mary Jo Bridge Palmer. We learn in this interview that Sam Bridge joined the society in 1948 after having returned home from World War II.



On the garden tour, the Garden Education Center of Greenwich

At the time, the society was run by the estate superintendents and was comprised primarily of these men and the gardeners who worked with them on the expansive estates of Greenwich. The society's purpose was information sharing and display of the results of their labors. In addition to trading ideas and tips among themselves, they brought in expert lecturers on relevant and timely topics. They also proudly displayed

the many varieties of plants and flowers they cultivated. And the competition for supremacy was keen.

The gardens and farms at these estates were no small undertaking. Acres upon acres were devoted to the cultivation of daffodils, tulips, dahlias, and other varieties of flowers, many of which were prizewinners, bringing accolades to the estates and to the superintendents responsible. In addition, many of the estates had bounteous vegetables and dairy products that fed not only the "lords" of these manors and their families, but also the families who lived and worked on the property. Additionally, people in town were able to purchase produce from the farms locally, while others were the beneficiaries of donated foods.

All of this is to say that the superintendents of these estates and farms were not dilettantes. They were well-educated horticulturists, many with college degrees from prestigious universities. As Alexander Gospodinoff, a landscape architect and longtime member, remarked in his interview of the same year, "The superintendent was God, and the rest of them were his disciples, and they worked like dogs."

It was a closed society. No women need apply. Not that their exclusion was in the by-laws. It was just unheard of for a woman to join the ranks of these horticulturists, until the 1960s, that is, when Elizabeth Carpenter, a florist and owner of The Little Flower Shop, located on Greenwich Avenue, made her entrance. Ms. Carpenter was herself quite a horticulturist and was finally accepted (although not a formally "voted-in" member). Apparently she held her own, sitting in meetings "packed full of men, smoking like chimneys," while she patiently but resolutely prepared the way for the women who would follow in her footsteps. In the meantime, she won the respect of the all-male society as the first woman among them.

In the 70's times changed, and the old estates began to change with them. Many of the grand old properties were divided up and sold off for development. Over the years, the nature of the horticultural society changed as well. Instead of the superintendents, their gardeners, and other businessmen, such as landscape designers and nurserymen, the members would increasingly be interested homeowners, most of whom would be women, but not until years later.

There was a dry spell for women after Ms. Carpenter first came on the scene. It was not until the early 90s when a formal procedure for membership was adopted, and women were allowed to join. According to Mr. Gospodinoff, "The women saved this Hort Society," and none other than Mary Jo Bridge Palmer was largely responsible. She took an early interest in the workings of the group, observing her father's active role, and when the time came, she saw to it that other interested women were able to participate as well. Following in her father's footsteps (Sam Bridge at times was president of the

society), Ms. Palmer over the years has been president and vice president of the organization.

Today the Westchester Fairfield Horticultural Society still serves as a place for its members to share information and to learn as much as possible about the venerable practice of horticulture, and in 2010, it celebrated its centennial, demonstrating not only its longevity, but more importantly, its value.