

Garden Club celebrates 100 years of strong community roots



By Brock Weir

At its founding in 1918, Canada was in the dying days of the First World War.

Resources were scarce, the country was battle-weary and, more often than not, gardeners were looking to their own plots of soil to grow vegetables to make their meals go the extra mile.

It was in this environment that the Aurora Garden and Horticultural Society first took root.

Everything, however, is cyclical and, as they prepare to mark their 100th anniversary this Saturday, new members are once again looking at their soil as a precious resource, a resource which can not only help all-important pollinators, but help them 'eat local' as well.

The Aurora Garden and Horticultural Society, colloquially known as Garden Aurora, will mark its centenary this Saturday with an Annual General Meeting featuring a talk by renowned Canadian gardener Mark Cullen.

It is the first of a full slate of events to commemorate their remarkable anniversary, longevity that has been hallmarked by, well, let's let Garden Club Board Member Donna Lewis take it from here:

'Survival,' says Ms. Lewis. 'We like to say we're rooted in our town and rooted in our community. The garden Club has been part of the community for 100 years. 100 years ago, they were thinking about victory gardens to help the war effort, grow your own food. Now, we're also doing victory gardens for pollinators, gardens for the 100 Mile Diet. There is a lot of information people need and you can't just go to YouTube for some of the stuff you need to know. You have to be able to go and talk to people and we have wonderful members that like to share their knowledge - they just want somebody to ask them the question.'

The first meeting of the Aurora Horticultural Society was held on April 23, 1918 at what was then Aurora's Town Hall. The first meeting came after a group of representatives presented a 60 signature petition requesting official status for the Aurora Horticultural Society.

W.H. Fleury was elected the organization's first President, with Thomas Sisman serving as First Vice President and Dr. W.J. Stevenson serving under him.

The first general meeting was held on May 27, 1919.

Their objective from the outset was 'beautifying the Town through public plantings' and educating new members about the positive effects gardening had on the environment.

This is very much the philosophy which drives the club 100 years later.

'People are very much more aware that being outside and interacting with nature is a healthy way to de-stress,' says Ms. Lewis.

'New members who come to us, whether they have a plot of land or not, even just have house plants, still find the benefit of coming to us. People don't often realise that some things you have to see, touch, smell and feel to truly appreciate what is there.'

Joining the Garden Club, adds member Branislava Milosevic, gives members "an opportunity to learn and garden beyond their yards."

"Through talking, visiting [other gardens on their annual Garden Tour], and seeing things, it enlarges your scope of gardening and we all do work as a team," she says. "Friendships develop and you start feeling like it is your garden family " that's what keeps us too."

Another member of the "garden family", Cindy Scythes, identifies the camaraderie that comes out of the Garden Club.

"I have been a member for 12 years and I am just your average home gardener," says Ms. Scythes. "I joined because I just like to garden and wanted to talk to people about gardening. When we started 100 years ago, the objects were fairly similar to now. They were trying to beautify Aurora, it was about education and people wanting to plant."

Since that time, says Ms. Scythes, the Garden Club has branched out once again beyond their membership to enrich the community in partnerships ranging from decorating Hillary House National Historic Site seasonally to partnering with the Alzheimer Society of York Region on building their therapy garden, which opened last year.

"There is a therapeutic piece to being in nature and working in a garden, whether you have arthritis or, as you get older, just digging in the dirt," she says.

For many members, the Club provides more than a good excuse to dig in the dirt, it is also very much a creative outlet for participants.

"I don't do anything in my profession that is related to gardens, but I just love nature and am really very for protecting our environment and being careful with what we do to our earth," says Ms. Milosevic. "I had a friend who was entering flower designs and, because I tend to believe I am artistic and like to experiment with different things, this got me into putting flower arrangements together and I just love it."

"There are all kinds of skills and talents you can develop once you join. I know I can find things on the internet, but it gives you an opportunity to engage all five of your senses, which you cannot do through a website. You learn differently and you experience stuff in a much more natural, nicer way."

As Ms. Lewis says on why they like to be known as "The Garden Club," rather than the more formal "Aurora Garden and Horticultural Society," she says, "We don't want people thinking we're all little blue-haired old ladies with big hats."

There's no danger of that as they embark on their milestone year.

For a full slate of upcoming events, including Saturday's centenary meeting, as well as the popular Annual Plant Sale on May 27, visit www.gardenaurora.ca.