

Council of Rockford Gardeners

Growing Pride in Rockford for Nearly 40 Years



The Council of Rockford Gardeners (CRG) and its five clubs strive to engage Rockfordians in gardening, philanthropy and other horticultural endeavors.

By Lynne Conner

Nurturing neighborhoods, creating relationships and building a stronger community are all goals of the Council of Rockford Gardeners (CRG). Established in March 1980, the Council and its five clubs strive to fulfill the organization's motto: "Enjoy nature's beauty through work and creativity."

"The garden history of Rockford is phenomenal," says Ann Somers, co-president of CRG. "The number of seed companies that used to be in this town is incredible. I think that this history has been lost or forgotten through the years, and one of our goals is to once again highlight the importance of gardening and what it can do for Rockford."

The Five Clubs

The strength and manpower of the CRG comes from its members and the many clubs they have formed. Current clubs are the Northern Illinois Daffodil Society, Potpourri, Plantaholics, Seedlings and Wildflowers.

As its name implies, Northern Illinois Daffodil Society has a special interest in the care and growing of daffodils. The other four clubs focus on garden-related activities that members are interested in. According to Somers, most members join a specific

club based on when it meets. Some clubs meet during the day, while others meet in the evenings to accommodate both retired and working members.

The clubs meet year-round, and it's not unusual to be a member of multiple clubs.

"Depending on the time of day and the season, there are topics and discussions that can be planned all through the year," Somers says. "One of the biggest reasons we have five individual clubs is because we don't have a dedicated meeting space that would accommodate all 136 members of the Council. Instead, having these smaller clubs allows members to feature their personal gardens and host meetings in their home or yard."

"We take lots of field trips," adds Arch Smith, CRG publicity chairman and a member of two clubs. His home has a screened-in porch, which is ideal for members wishing to view his backyard garden during inclement weather. Additionally, a bedroom in Smith's home is partially dedicated to houseplants and seedlings that grow indoors during the winter for planting in the spring.

"Of the five clubs, it's pretty easy to find one that fits you and the facets of gardening that you are interested in," says Somers. "Each club develops their own schedule of topics, meeting times,





Every year, the CRG puts on a free garden walk so the community can take in the beautiful yards of CRG members and other participants.

trips to public and private gardens, and participation in special causes of interest to their members.”

Annual Events and Scholarships

The Council of Rockford Gardeners has a few annual events where all five clubs are brought together.

“We started an event, a couple of years ago, called the Gathering of Clubs (GoC),” Somers says. “This event is a chance for all of our clubs to get together and exchange ideas, socialize and have some fun.”

The GoC has been hosted by each club on a rotating basis.

“This past summer, the Potpourri club commemorated its 40th anniversary, and since I belong to Potpourri, we hosted the GoC in my backyard garden,” Smith says.

“Inviting all the Council members to an event like the GoC oftentimes means that we have the gathering at local businesses,” Somers adds. “We’ve gone to Gensler Gardens early in the spring, and they were very accommodating. The local nurseries have all been terribly generous in allowing us to have meetings at their businesses, and many nurseries have put on an educational program for us, as our budget is quite limited.”

The CRG raises funds through two annual luncheons and occasional memorials for members who have died. The Luncheon and Scholarship Fundraiser, held each spring and holiday season, recognizes the contributions of CRG members, community organizations and individuals who are proponents of gardening. The luncheons also include a keynote speaker, a dollar raffle and a 50/50 raffle.

At the holiday luncheons in both 2017 and 2018, the CRG awarded \$1,500 scholarships to twin brothers

who are studying horticulture at Kishwaukee Community College in Malta, Ill.

“These boys are great,” Somers says. “Andre and Ulysses Vallejo, both graduates of Rockford East High School, just warmed our hearts. They spoke to our group and were so appreciative of the scholarships. They will accomplish great things in the world of horticulture. One of the boys is helping to raise money for a gardening program at East High School. It’s spectacular what these boys are doing.”

“Receiving this scholarship allows me to continue my studies in the field of horticulture, collaborate on projects with fellow students and enter a work-study program as a greenhouse manager,”



Lynne Corner photo

Council of Rockford Gardeners representatives Elaine Parrovecchio (far left) and Kathy Batzkall (far right) present Ulysses (left middle) and Andrew Vallejo with scholarships at the annual Council of Rockford Gardeners Holiday Luncheon and Scholarship fundraiser.



The CRG's annual garden walk typically features individual yards and public gardens, such as Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens, in Rockford.

adds Ulysses. "I will also continue to give back to my school by working in the greenhouse and by assisting at the basketball and volleyball games."

Andre sees the scholarship as helping him further his role as a leader at Kishwaukee Community College.

"I would like to continue my role as Horticulture Club president and organize more extra-curricular student events in the field of horticulture," he says. "I think this will give me a head start on possibly managing my own landscaping business after I graduate."

According to Somers, the CRG utilizes outsider input to choose the scholarship recipients.

"We rely on the recommendations of Janet Gallagher, one of the horticulture instructors at Kishwaukee Community College," she says. "Kish has pretty much the only horticulture program in the area, and Janet knows what we are looking for in a scholarship candidate. We want someone who is in need of the funds, and someone who is enthusiastic about the hort program. That's all taken into consideration when choosing a scholarship winner for us."

The Annual Free Garden Walk

The biggest philanthropic event on the Council of Rockford Gardeners' agenda is the Annual Free Garden Walk, typically held on the third Wednesday of June. For around 30 years, club members have opened their yards to the public for viewing.

The event draws garden enthusiasts from as far as Madison, Wis., Milwaukee and Chicago. According to Somers, entire

gardening clubs from other Illinois cities often plan day-trips to Rockford just to participate in the Garden Walk. Detailed maps for the event are available at local nurseries and on the CRG website.

"Rockford is a really good destination for gardens," Somers says. "The public gardens here are magnificent. For a city of this size, we've got incredible attractions."

In addition to individual homes scattered throughout the community, some local churches and public gardens have been featured on the Walk, which draws around 500 to 600 participants annually. The Garden Walk is held rain or shine, which has led to some interesting situations in years past.

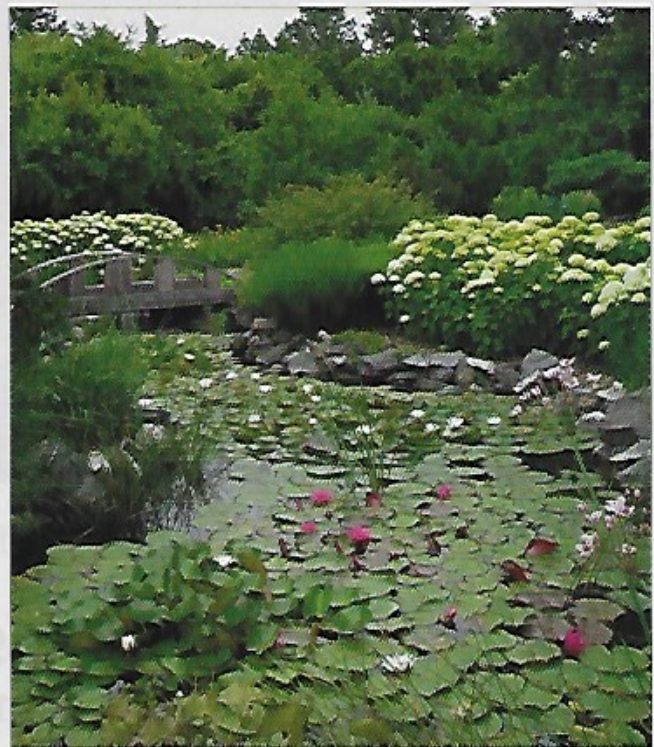
"A very rainy June 2018 worried many gardeners on the Walk because they weren't able to attend to their plants as they wanted," Smith says. "I believe we had rain all the way up to the event, then it was clear on the day of the Walk, but rain returned the day after."

In 2014, heavy rain forced the Garden Walk hosts to get creative in showing their yards.

"There was a couple in Machesney Park who lived at the bottom of a hill where all the rain had made their yard a giant marsh. So, they put down large, thin boards over the soggy grass and people walked on the boards to see the gardens," recalls Smith, who hosted Garden Walkers at his home and opted to show his yard through the screened-in porch.

"It was a bit crowded, but no one got wet," he remembers.

"We strive for variety on the Garden Walk by showcasing small yards, large yards, some that have themes and some that are



Throughout the year, the CRG clubs participate in philanthropic activities such as volunteering at Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden.





The Council of Rockford Gardeners is open to anyone with an interest in beautifying the city's landscape. Members believe it's important to continue sharing their knowledge and experience as they encourage the next generation of passionate gardeners.

a combination of professional and personal landscaping," Somers adds. "Gardens generally come together over time, and that's what provides gardeners with a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. The Garden Walk is a culmination of hard work. It's a big day, it's a long day, but it's a really fun day."

The Council of Rockford Gardeners is involved in other philanthropic endeavors around the Rockford area. Members provide planters for Habitat for Humanity homes and volunteer at the Rock River Valley Food Pantry, Klehm Arboretum, Sinissippi Gardens and Nicholas Conservatory.

A Passion for Horticulture

Both Somers and Smith feel that gardening and interest in horticulture are fast becoming lost arts. But as they see it, that doesn't have to happen.

"In neighborhoods, if one person starts to care about their property and improve things, it very often catches on," Somers says. "I think gardening does the same thing; working on a garden leads to meeting your neighbors, improving the neighborhood and eventually helping the community."

"When we moved into our house, there really wasn't much in our yard besides the trees," Smith adds. "The first summer we were here, we walked over to one of our neighbors' yards which had been on the Garden Walk. We met them, got to know them

and became friends. This couple in their 80s were the inspiration for fixing up our yard."

The Rockford region has many garden areas around hospitals, retirement communities, nursing care centers and schools. To both Somers and Smith, this highlights the importance of gardening. They are especially delighted to see the growing popularity of "heirloom gardens" – plants or seeds that have been passed down from one generation to the next. Heirloom gardening is a way to preserve and promulgate a plant species as a living tribute to friends or relatives who have died.

The Council of Rockford Gardeners is open to the public, and choosing a club is entirely a matter of personal preference and interests.

Membership dues for the CRG are currently \$21 per year, which gives local members affiliation with state and national garden councils. For more information, visit councilofrockfordgardeners.org.

"Gardeners are very generous people," Somers says. "Gardeners like to nurture, they share their bounty, they will split a plant in half so you can use it in your garden. There is a camaraderie among gardeners that spreads through neighborhoods and hopefully through the community to make it stronger and better.

"Gardening sustains our souls, our stomachs, our cities and our society." ■

