

## The Gardeners Exchange Group

The Gardeners Exchange Group was the creation of Marlys Bell in the late 1990s. Marlys took early retirement from the Federal Government when her husband wanted to retire to Shepherdstown. She was at loose ends, having implemented the National Head Start Program and still an active scholar. She threw her energies into creating an extensive garden in a series of beds on their property and met many fellow gardeners. She started sharing plants as gardeners tend to do.

Marlys's natural organizing instincts could not be suppressed. She led a group of local gardeners in discussions of what could be. Their first open meeting was in Judy Jones's backyard on Washington Street in Shepherdstown. That first casual word-of-mouth invitation drew about 40 people! Committees were quickly formed and an organizational structure came together.

The unifying idea was the sharing of information and plants in our local community. Many members were active in other garden clubs and projects, and the club was a rich source of volunteers and support in a variety of garden-related projects. An early activity of GEG was an extensive publication of successful local plantings in many special-interest categories. A huge notebook of incredible local information and resources was a real membership benefit. A website, developed and implemented by a team of interested and dedicated individuals led by Bob Smith, provided up-to-date information. At the time, the website and email communication were unusual in volunteer organizations in general and in garden circles in particular.

Membership grew to over 100 members. Attendance at the monthly meetings often included 40 or more members. The plant exchange was cited as a major benefit. Other significant benefits were the friendships formed and the sense of community created. The opportunity to visit the gardens of many local gardeners was a great way to learn about the area.

(Alas, Marlys had to move again — this time to Florida where she formed a similar group and published a book on wildflowers of Florida, with photographs by her husband, Jay Bell.)

Membership Chair Sheri Garner made a personal visit to each new member to deliver the GEG notebook and tour their garden. She could facilitate some amazing

plant exchanges to get new members started! Mary Stanley was Treasurer for years and attended the first meeting.

A highlight of the garden year was the annual Seed Catalog Potluck Dinner in January. Non-gardener spouses were not encouraged to attend as the event was intense and popular. Eventually it outgrew the Smith-Stanley home and moved to the War Memorial Building! The Shepherdstown *Back Alley Tour and Tea* grew out of these meetings and the organization also supported the *Tomato Fest* and *Roots and Shoots*, the gardening program at Shepherdstown Elementary School. Active membership spread to Berkeley and Morgan Counties, and visits to gardens farther afield were (and are) common.

Membership declined as active members formed their own exchanges and meetings became less informative and more social. The founders got distracted, as busy people do, and others took over leadership duties. Carole Brooks of Uvilla was a leader for years and began to rebuild the group.

Jane Blash took over as GEG's coordinator in 2014. Terry Thorson created and administers the new [G-E-G.org website](http://G-E-G.org), where the original [\*GEG Favorite Plants List\*](#) is available to download. Terry also maintains the GEG email list and sends out the occasional newsletter; Jane provides the copy. Members meet early in the year to plan programs, some of which rely on the expertise of the Master Gardeners Association and the Extension Service and some which are provided by our members or others in the community. A monthly meeting comes together when a topic, speaker, program host, and program coordinator are assigned, the details worked out, the meeting posted on the website calendar — and the indefatigable Renny Smith sends the news out to the local papers. Jane expresses her appreciation to “a devoted core who keep the programs informative with top-notch speakers and the gatherings friendly and fun!”

Membership is now free of charge and is as simple as signing up for the GEG newsletter. As always, everyone is welcome at the monthly meetings, usually April through September. Members can post photos, share their plants, and get their questions answered on the GEG Facebook page, skillfully managed by Kathryn Stokey.

— *Thanks to Renny Smith for seeing the need for this history and working to put it together.*