

Saskatchewan Horticultural Association History

Three horticultural clubs met in Regina in 1925 to discuss the establishment of a provincial organization. Two years later, on April 19, 1927, the Saskatchewan Horticultural Societies Association (now the Saskatchewan Horticultural Association) was formed during an inaugural meeting of 16 representatives from Assiniboia, Indian Head, Melville, Moose Jaw, Regina, Saskatoon, Springside, Weyburn, and Yorkton. Chief proponent amongst these 16 visionary individuals was the recently appointed (1921) head of the Horticulture and Forestry Department at the University of Saskatchewan, Dr. Cecil F. Patterson. (Over the next 35 years Dr. Patterson was to become a legend in cold climate horticulture. Breeding, selecting, and introducing dozens of prairie hardy fruit varieties and lilies, he greatly enriched the diversity of prairie horticulture.)

The initial Association by-laws prepared by B. A. See of Weyburn were adopted at this founding meeting. Numerous revisions and amendments have since been made.

In May of 1928, the Saskatchewan Legislature passed the Horticultural Societies Act, Chapter 62 of the Statutes of Saskatchewan. This Act enables a local horticultural society to become a legal entity and provides certain responsibilities and privileges.

The dust bowl years of the 1930's were difficult ones for the province with grain and fodder crops failing dramatically. Thousands of families were forced to leave the province because of food shortages and bankruptcy. Those families who remained survived the depression on the strength of drought stressed vegetable gardens supplemented with a meager protein and fruit supply that arrived by rail from Ontario orchards and east coast fishers. Vegetable gardens became vital in both rural and urban settings.

The S.H.A. languished during the decade of the 1930's.

The federal government enacted the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act in 1935 with the aims of conquering soil erosion, conserving and re-vitalizing the remaining soils, creating sustainable water supplies and converting much of the abandoned farmland into community pastures that would provide sustainable pasture for beef production. Tree nurseries were established across the prairie region which

for the next 70 years distributed millions of free tree seedlings for the creation of thousands of miles of shelter belts and farmyard plantings. The Saskatchewan nursery was located at Indian Head. It was finally disbanded about 2015, but it has left Indian Head with a powerful horticultural legacy. For many years the tree nursery was also a demonstration site of innovative farming practices and ornamental plantings. S.H.A. during the tenure of Mr. Brian Porter, in fact funded and maintained a collection of peonies that was recognized nation wide.

During the war years local food production was again encouraged with rationing of various commodities including sugar encouraging the growth of the honey industry in Saskatchewan. Bees need nectar from flowers to produce honey, so gardens and yards were soon sporting colourful displays of annual and perennial flowers, augmented by the development of small orchards.

Both the depression and World War II did much to ensure that horticulture continued a vital component of our agricultural heritage. This was further encouraged by the Saskatchewan government when it created the position of Provincial Horticulturist, held for thirty years by Mr. Stan Sheard who was succeeded by Mr. Brian Porter. Both gentlemen liaised and aided the local horticulture industry and the amateur horticulture clubs from one end of the province to the other.

The Horticulture Department of the University also created for the same reasons an extension position, filled for decades by Mr. Dave R. Robinson, and in later years by Sara Williams.

“Keeping up with the Joneses” became *de riguer* as the Boomer generation began establishing their households. Suburbia blossomed with bungalows and white picket fences, foundation plantings of shrubs and evergreens and acres upon acres of immaculate green sward!

S.H.A. did well during the 70's and 80's. Forty plus local clubs with several thousand members ensured that provincial shows and spring and fall sessions were always fully registered. These functions rotated throughout the province, with tiny communities like Wood Mountain hosting a Provincial show with 1500 exhibits from 60 individuals and clubs. The bigger centres were often used for the conferences and conventions because they offered sufficient accommodation and meeting facilities to service the needs of our members.

The Information Age with its computers and the dawning of the internet has slowly eroded public interest in horticulture. That after-supper hour that once served a perfect time to be weeding amongst the peas and beans or deadheading petunias, geraniums and marigolds now seems to be occupied with answering emails, social media and computer games. Where once youngsters spent time hoeing potatoes or watching the bumble bees gathering nectar amongst the poppies, organized sport now beacons them to the sports field and track ovals.

Local clubs have unwittingly become seniors' clubs, and with that, change in the focus of the societies. Gone are the huge adjudicated provincial shows, so too the full-to-bulging conferences and conventions. Instead, we do what we have the energy to accomplish and are happy when we can retire to our garden bench for an hour's siesta!

The Covid era, however dismal and depressing it seemed, rekindled much interest in backyard gardening. Thousands spent the summer of 2020 tending vegetables and flowers, so much so that dozens of small seed companies sold out their seed supplies well before the outdoor gardening season started. Those of us senior gardeners were continuously fielding gardening queries, and we were eager and happy to share! So perhaps we can dare to hope that the age-old passion for horticulture has indeed survived and is doing well in our midst! Long live the S.H.A.