

VIMGA History: 1982-2015

The Vancouver Island Master Gardeners Association (VIMGA), informally constituted around 1996, inherited over twenty years' experience and pioneering in the Pacific Northwest. What has become a movement across the US and Canada, began with an idea of how to solve a problem in Tacoma, Washington, in 1972. Since then, the contribution of dedicated gardeners volunteering their time and expertise has helped transform the practices of tens of thousands of home gardeners everywhere on the continent. VIMGA has established itself firmly in the best of these volunteer traditions. This brief history draws on multiple sources in an attempt to tell that story. It is an inspiring story of individuals' perseverance, caring and effort.

The problem to be solved in Tacoma was how to respond to the public's "burgeoning interest" and increasing demand for more gardening information. The horticulture faculty in the extension department at Washington State University (WSU) were unable to handle this level of demand. Their principal concern was crop production, not backyard vegetable plots and gardens. At the same time, they were doubtful that their expertise could be satisfactorily replaced by people who were simply enthusiastic gardeners. Over two or three years, however, David Gibby and Bill Scheer, Area Extension Agents at the university, managed to persuade reluctant horticulture specialists to trust and evaluate carefully selected and trained gardeners to be volunteers. In order to test public interest, and after extensive publicity, they held a highly successful trial clinic at the Tacoma Mall. Dr. Gibby estimated that at least 250 people came to the clinic. It affirmed the value of expert volunteer gardeners and established a foundation of principles and processes that have been adopted and developed up to the present. An early question was how to refer to such volunteers in a way that acknowledged their earned expertise. Gibby and Scheer decided to borrow the title awarded for the highest proficiency level in horticulture in Germany; they anglicized "Gartenmeister" to the moniker "Master Gardener" which has remained the title given for graduates of the course.

Some years later, the BC Ministry of Agriculture experienced a similar problem: the public's demand for gardening information was much greater than the extension department could handle. Norma Senn¹, provincial urban horticulturalist, was sent to consult with the WSU

¹ Senn, 2009 in Roberts, 2010

program in King County, Seattle and, supported by the BC Ministry of Agriculture, she applied their model for a master gardener program in BC. The first program² was offered starting in January of 1982 at Deer Lake Park in Burnaby in a free meeting room provided by the municipality of Burnaby. Starting in the fall of 1982, Norma added courses in Penticton on Mondays, and Kelowna on Tuesdays. Also in 1982, Nori Pope, who had been one of the first students in the Ministry run course offered a class in Courtenay, on Vancouver Island. He referred to himself as the first on the island to have taken the course and he went on to manage a famous English Garden.³ Then in January, 1983, more programs were initiated for the lower Mainland in Cloverdale, plus Victoria and Nanaimo, (Nanaimo on Thursdays at Malaspina College; in Victoria at the Brentwood Bay restaurant/ hotel on Fridays). In January 1984, the program moved to Van Dusen Botanical Gardens, in Vancouver. During this period, many of the Master Gardeners were provided with a desk, reference works and use of a phone in the BC Ministry of Agriculture (BCMA) office in Cloverdale. They answered questions from home gardeners two or three days a week between March and late June. Although this was a popular and successful program, the Ministry was operating with a reduced budget and was moving in different directions, away from home gardening; the Master Gardener program was cut.

All was not lost, however. The energy and momentum for assisting home gardeners had gathered over these early years and there was a pool of enthusiastic and expert gardeners available to continue the work if the program could be re-started. To the rescue came a bridge partner of Rita Lehmann, a dedicated lifetime gardener, who had enthusiastically talked to her bridge friends about Norma's class at Van Dusen. With her \$6,000 donation, a coordinator was found to carry on the course. Thereafter, in a happy collaboration based on a common interest in encouraging gardeners, Van Dusen supplied meeting facilities, classroom, copying machines, a library, PA system, kitchen, slide presentation equipment and unlimited support from Van Dusen staff.⁴ Derry Walsh coordinated the start-up and the program became the first anywhere to be financially self-sustaining.⁵ Initially, however, Derry had to rely on Ministry speakers associated with the extension department as her guest lecturers. Since they were admonished not to do

² Senn, 2009 in Roberts, 2010

³ Pam Harrison, 2016

⁴ Derry Walsh 2010, in Roberts, 2010

⁵ Minutes, September 18, 2004 Senn, 2009 in Roberts, 2010

“home gardener related work”, she eventually needed to look outside for alternative sources and in so doing, extended the scope of expertise available to students in the program.

During this first year, the pattern for training was established: the course ran for 12 weeks, was taught by 12 different lecturers on different topics, and concluded with an exam. All coursework was concentrated at Van Dusen and although it was open to students from around the province, as a practical matter, most came from the Vancouver area. The requirement was to do 50 hours of volunteer work in their first year and 20 the second year after the coursework, and 10 hours thereafter to keep their Certified Master Gardener status.⁶⁷ Fulfilling their volunteer hours in distant communities would have been very challenging if not impossible for most. Once the course was completed at Van Dusen in Vancouver, for instance, the challenge for those who had moved, like Pam Harrison and Patty Daley whose homes were on Vancouver Island, was how to fulfil these requirements for volunteer hours. There were almost no opportunities to do clinics on the Island. Partly this was because students were required to be partnered with a certified MG, someone who had completed both the course and the 70 hours of volunteering. Given the difficulties, some people may have taken the Van Dusen course, moved away and simply not been able to complete the volunteer component. At that time, the cost of the course was \$650. On completion, students were refunded half of that amount. Not to fulfil the contract and complete the volunteer component would have created an ethical conflict for Pam. She recalls that she and Patty Daley felt obligated to sign up for most of their clinics around the city of Vancouver, despite the added time and costs the ferry travel incurred.

The Master Gardener program at this time seemed to attract people who shared two essential characteristics: they were experienced and knowledgeable gardeners and were committed to sharing their knowledge as volunteers. The course itself was described as suitable for experienced gardeners who wanted to underpin their practical knowledge with theoretical, academic knowledge. They needed to be learners. And, indeed, most of these first students, who also were ones who helped pioneer VIMGA, had demonstrated that commitment to formal

⁶ Minutes, September 18, 2004 Senn, 2009 in Roberts, 2010

⁷ *ibid.*

academic learning. Joan Rich, who eventually moved to Nanoose on Vancouver Island, had



given up a career as a physiotherapist after moving to Canada and her passion became plants instead of people. She enrolled in the Horticulture program at Capilano College and completed all the assignments as well as passed the exams. She became an expert on rhododendron culture, was a Friend of the Gardens at UBC, worked in the Asian garden and started a magnolia study. And, in 1986, she continued her gardening education by enrolling in the Master Gardener course. Gail Reed, who moved from North Vancouver to Gabriola Island, took the Capilano Horticulture program with

Joan in the 1980's and like her went on to sign up for the Master Gardener program in 1986. She was told that she was "too busy" to meet the demands of the course and the hours of volunteering. Undeterred, she took up the study of tissue culture instead. She was finally able to take the Master Gardener course in 2000.

Pam Harrison had grown up in a gardening household in Victoria on Vancouver Island, had worked at Butchart Gardens, and, as she says, was "totally ready to be immersed in serious gardening learning,"⁸ when she enrolled in the course in 1990.



It was not until 1994, however, when Sally Shivers moved to Qualicum Beach after completing her Van Dusen training that an actual group began to take shape on Vancouver Island. Sally was urged by the then Coordinator of the Van Dusen program, Jennifer Sherlock, to contact the MGs on the Van Dusen membership list who were representing Van Dusen on the Island but getting no assistance. Sally made the contacts and held an informal meeting at her house. Six Van Dusen MGs from Courtenay, Gabriola Island, Chemainus, Parksville and Qualicum Beach met for a pot luck lunch: Pam Harrison, Patty Daley, Marylou Campbell, Jenny Morris, Jacquie Thomson and Sally. They decided to meet a couple of times a year to plan clinics. Initially, and with a little funding from the Master Gardener Association in

⁸ Pam Harrison, 2016



Vancouver, they offered clinics locally. They continued, however, to be attached to the Van Dusen program; they followed Van Dusen guidelines for volunteers and sent their records of hours and details about clinics each year to Vancouver. This little Island group was soon joined by others who became very active members, people like Joan Rich, the rhododendron expert who had already spent years volunteering in North

Vancouver, and who, like Gail Reed, was delighted to find gardeners interested in more than window boxes and ornamental plants. Between 1995 and 2000, the group of Island MGs grew bigger to include Norma Duchene, Kim Hammond, Linda Cooper, and Linda Rehlinger. At first, their main effort was focused on planning clinics to assist the public. But they themselves wanted to continue learning and they needed education sessions they all could attend without having to travel to Vancouver. At that time, there was just one event a year in Vancouver at Van Dusen, the Spring Forum, and it was hard for many people to get there.

Early in 1999, Sally wrote to Jennifer Sherlock, the Coordinator for MGs at Van Dusen, saying that “We would like to have a speaker for our group, at least once a year.”⁹ The group offered to pay ferry fare and offer accommodation if necessary, if someone could be found to come to Vancouver Island. As well as such challenges, it was also difficult for the small group to respond to requests for clinics - not enough ‘people power’ at that stage of their development. While it was clear that valid and valuable educational opportunities and outings could be arranged locally, making that possible meant having an adequate space for meetings. They had become too numerous for gathering at each others’ homes.

They secured the use of the Kinsman’s hut in Parksville and that location served as an interim venue until the group was able to move to the Civic Centre in Parksville. To raise funds for hiring speakers locally, they held plant sales and accumulated quite large sums. Such activity,

⁹ Letter from Sally Shivers, February 23, 1999

along with a presence at the Qualicum Beach Seedy Saturday and in clinics at nurseries raised their profile and attracted community attention. The Vancouver Island MGs were emerging as an independent entity.

At the same time, in Vancouver, membership of the Vancouver Master Gardener association was



also growing and MGs in that group were proposing that it spawn an independent Master Gardeners Association of BC (MGABC), associated with Van Dusen, but with its own executive. Jennifer Sherlock's position had been eliminated at VanDusen to save costs but her absence left a significant gap in services to MGs.

The MGs and Van Dusen began work on building a new relationship to take into account the moving away of MGs from the Van Dusen home base. Many had migrated elsewhere in the lower mainland and beyond. For all these scattered but dedicated MGs, there was clearly a need for local, more accessible MG communities, and they felt meeting these needs could be achieved in smaller sub-groups of MGs. The members on Vancouver Island shared this belief and for some it seemed quite overdue that there be a local home base. Having the necessary expertise and, moreover, a potential location for garden work, the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific (HCP) initiated a discussion in 2000 about creating a Basic Master Gardener Course in Victoria. Liz Haan, then President of MGABC, and Jenny Morris, one of the MGs from the Upper Island, met with the HCP to consider a possible course outline and standards and qualifications of teachers for such a course. Like their predecessors in Tacoma, these Van Dusen graduates were concerned about maintaining high standards for the volunteers. While nothing was definitely agreed upon collectively at this meeting, the Horticultural Centre used its newsletter in April to announce its independent intentions for a program. Although Van Dusen had not actually agreed to or approved such an initiative, the Victoria Master Gardeners Association (VMGA) came into being at this juncture and a successful MG course was offered that spring of 2000, taught by Heide Hermary. In August of that year, there were still misunderstandings about the desired

relationship with the MGABC. Liz Haan, Chair, cautioned that “using, without our permission, our materials, expertise and our name and reputation to promote an independent group”¹⁰ would be detrimental to the whole association.

Expressions of territoriality and evidence of strains seem usually to accompany transitions from a centre to outposts in any growing network. The mother organization is concerned about quality of performance and prefers to maintain control over her representatives. In June 2001, the MGABC executive listed a number of non-negotiable issues for any expansion outside the Lower mainland. They indicated that they “wish to maintain reasonably tight control of any expansion and resulting satellite program, especially in the area of finances, facility, certification, organizational philosophy and student selection.”¹¹ As more and more MGs moved away from Van Dusen, however, it was not simply a matter of such control but also a matter of the need for support and collaboration among the MGs who found themselves working in small groups. With the establishing of the Victoria association, MGs in the widespread Island communities decided that they needed their own training course and association. They began moving toward creating a formally independent unit. There were many advantages to an Island Association: it would be able to collect dues from its members and build up a fund for its own activities rather than send dues to MGABC, whose activities were often ones that Islanders could not participate in without the expense of ferry trips and overnight stays in Vancouver; an Island Association would work toward training volunteers locally rather than depend on Van Dusen and thereby attract more volunteers to become MGs for the local community. Conditions on the Island differed significantly from those in Vancouver: distances are much greater and volunteers spread out over a wide area; gardening interests differ when people have more than city lots to work with; and in Vancouver, the program was based at a garden which was not available at that time on the Island, north of Victoria.

Despite these constraints, the Island MGs were determined to establish their own program. MGs already volunteering on the Island knew of locations for their volunteer services so that component of the follow-up to the course could be taken care of fairly readily. It was the

¹⁰ Liz Haan, August 24, 2000.

¹¹ MGABC Executive summary, June 2001

training itself that presented the challenges. Any program would need to meet the standards set by Van Dusen and MGABC. But first, a supporting institution approved by MGABC would need to be found to provide infrastructure. A Continuing Education instructor, Janet Germann, at Malaspina College in Duncan, approached Jenny Morris, a Van Dusen trained MG, living in Chemainus, about getting an MG program at the college. A meeting was arranged. Liz Haan, president of MGABC, Doreen Godwin, coordinator of the Basic Training Course for Van Dusen, and Jenny Morris, as representative of Island MGs, met with Janet Germann from Malaspina and discussed possibilities. In 2002, after many months of negotiation and firm resolve on the part of both Malaspina and the Master Gardeners, agreement was reached. The first Island-based Master Gardener Basic Training Course, following the Van Dusen model, was offered at Malaspina Duncan in 2002, facilitated by Barb Kohlmann. Nine students graduated.

With a course established and students graduated, now there was increased pressure for the amorphous group of dedicated MGs, scattered in communities along the coast of the Island, to amalgamate into a clearly definable organization, a process that took another two years. The nine students took the initiative and became the Duncan Malaspina group of MGs. They reported their volunteer advice hours to MGABC, as did other Island MGs, but depended on the Island MGs to help them perform their volunteer service. In order to be more involved in the



policy and decision making at MGABC, Sally Shivers stood for and was elected to serve for two years on the Provincial MGABC Council as a Member-at-Large. Island MGs now had their first official representation on that provincial council. With the successful start of a Basic Course on the Island in Duncan, a second group of students was enrolled in 2003. Twenty graduated from that class. They all needed clinic opportunities which the previous year's graduates organized. Both the course and the clinic activity were centred mainly in Duncan. But another group of Van Dusen MGs in the Qualicum Beach area had also been doing clinics and were ready to offer

assistance to graduates. Angela Einarson was one of these graduates. Since she lived in Qualicum Beach, this was a logical place for her to offer clinics rather than travel south to Duncan. The Qualicum Beach group of Master Gardeners was most supportive of the new Duncan Master Gardeners in Training (MGITs). At a January 2004 Mid-Island planning meeting and soon after, Angela met the women who were to become long-term MGs: Sally Shivers, Joan Rich, Pam Harrison, Jacquie Thompson, Kim Hammond, Gail Reed, Mary Lou Campbell, Jo Ann Canning, Linda Cooper, Norma Dechene, Linda Rehlinger, Janet Sawatsky, and one brave man, Tony Berniaz.

One of Linda's first clinics, an experience most MGs will remember well, was at Seedy Saturday in Qualicum. In common with many other MGITs at the beginning, she found herself feeling overwhelmed as the questions came non-stop all day from an enthusiastic crowd, but was helped by her experienced MG partners. She was undeterred in her determination to succeed and went on to volunteer in many different capacities.

Almost organically and very logically, such small groups of MGs at their different Island locations began the process of forming their own local associations. Creating these associations



would encourage the development of consistent guidelines that reflected the particular conditions of the Island. In January 2003, Mary Lou Campbell hosted a gathering on Gabriola Island with six other MGs to discuss the future of the Island MG policies and procedures. They agreed that many of the MGABC guidelines did not fit

Island situations and that they should produce their own manual and become a separate, affiliated organization. They proposed a meeting with all the other groups on the Island to discuss amalgamation. That next meeting took place at Jenny Morris' house in Chemainus on April 22, 2003. Representatives of the 21 Island members came from the Duncan/ Malaspina group, from Parksville/Qualicum and from each area North, Mid and South Island, as well as from the Horticultural Centre of the Pacific (HCP). Barb Kohlman came as the coordinator of both the Duncan/Malaspina MG course and the HCP course.

As the first order of business, they needed to agree on their mission and discussed terms. The draft statement read as follows:

“To bring together representatives of all MG training programs on the Island and consider forming Master Gardener Associations with membership to all active master gardeners from each training program. To enable all MGs in each area to function as one integrated unit regardless of where they received training.

N.B. Master gardener training programs currently operating in BC are based on the Washington State Master Gardener Program and use the Washington State Manual.”

Once participants had discussed the mission statement, they turned to think about its implications. The governing body would be the MGABC. On the Island, individual associations could cluster by geographical area: Mid-island, Duncan and Victoria. All would operate under common policies and guidelines so members in good standing could volunteer at any arranged opportunities, regardless of training location.

The next step was to examine the experience of others. Individuals volunteered to report on the current policies and guidelines used by VanDusen, Malaspina and Victoria Master Gardeners. At the next meeting, scheduled for June 10th, 2003 in Maple Bay, an Ad hoc committee would draft policies for clinics and the expectations for MGs and ask Victoria to confirm their willingness to participate in the process and be part of the resulting organization. Members of the Committee included recently trained Island MGs as well as VanDusen veterans: Sally Shivers (VanD North), Angela Einarson (Duncan North), Wendy Gregory (Duncan Mid), Gerry Van Mook (Duncan Mid), Barb Kohlman (Duncan South), Shirley Rainey (VanD South). By this time, however, the Steering Committee of the Victoria group had their Constitution and Bylaws nearly ready for ratification and they had a Volunteer Handbook ready to distribute. Amalgamation with the other Island communities at this juncture raised logistical questions for the Victoria group, but their representative, Donna Cottell, did not dismiss the feasibility of an amalgamation and suggested a Fall meeting that would include the local institutional host and base for their courses, the Horticultural Center of the Pacific. That meeting took place in October and after reflecting on their concerns, the decision about amalgamation was left to the HCP to decide.

In the meantime, the Ad hoc Committee continued to work on refining procedures and clarifying expectations for volunteers. In August, clinic record keeping was formalized with records required of individual hours fulfilled and details of event participation at the venues. In September, the committee met at Cobble Hill to review the manual, to determine volunteer hour requirements and other expectations of members, and to discuss terms for executive positions. Education hour requirements were added: 5 hours in year two for trainees and 5 for certified MGs. A budget was proposed by Barb Kohlman, setting annual membership fees at \$35 per member to pay for insurance, MGABC newsletter, travel expenses for members attending monthly meetings in Vancouver, and equipment and services such as postage, copying etc. All this activity on the part of organizers led finally to the major decision, held at a meeting at Malaspina College in Nanaimo on November 2, 2003, to officially constitute an association of Vancouver Island Master Gardeners. An exciting development that represented the efforts of many years by dedicated, long-term MGs as well as enthusiastic new recruits.

The Formation and Growing of VIMGA 2003 - 2015

As a result of the meeting on November 2, 2003, thirty-one members from all Island groups except Victoria and the HCP, voted unanimously for amalgamation, regardless of where members were trained, VanDusen or Duncan. The Island was organized into 3 geographic areas: Campbell River to Duke Point; Duke Point to Mill Bay; Mill Bay to Victoria. Members also voted to accept the October 6, 2003 manual drafted by the Ad hoc Committee. A President and Treasurer were to be elected at a spring meeting in 2004, and a Secretary and Vice-President at a fall meeting. Volunteer positions and assignments were proposed and volunteers signed up. Membership rose to 51 in December 2003.

Such decisions sketched out an operational skeleton. Building a volunteer community which can grow through a functioning and thriving organization, however, takes time and commitment. Success would depend on the individuals who came forward with the requisite skills, patience and willingness to compromise. The story that unfolds from this point onward focuses on the development of those elements of the enterprise that were central to its future and on the individuals who contributed to them: relationship with the MGABC; relationship with the host

institution, Malaspina/Vancouver Island University; geographical challenges; clinic planning and requirements; basic training course curriculum, and support of new volunteers; constitution and by-laws to conform with provincial regulations; job descriptions; certification of MGs; use of the title “Master Gardener”; terms of membership; and not least, the development of a funding base for activities and expenses.

VIMGA and the MGABC

In the early days between 1994 and 2000, the MGs on Vancouver Island creatively improvised. They initiated contacts with each other, met at each other’s homes and constructed networks while they worked to maintain patterns of practice and volunteering with a minimum of support from MGABC. Most of them had ties to the Vancouver based organization, having trained at Van Dusen, and annual membership fees continued to be paid to MGABC. What this had meant was that VIMGA had to request their funds back from MGABC for their activities, even though they were supplying those funds. As Jen Morris and Gene Freott had asked in a letter early in 2002, “Why should so many of our executive board be un-elected? “Appointed positions...are one of the reasons we have an executive that is unresponsive...to sharing power with the main body of MGs.”¹² The Chair, Doug Courtemanche, recognized the problem and bylaws were revised to make the governance of the organization more democratic. Sally Shivers’ election in 2002 gave VIMGA a voice on the MGABC board and she assisted in drafting an Affiliation Agreement that would better represent VIMGA’s interests. The VIMGA Steering Committee approved the agreement on March 16, 2004 and VIMGA officially became an affiliate in May 2004. A next step in refining the relationship was taken in September 2004. An addition was made to the details on membership that specified the right of all members of MGABC, including affiliates, to nominate, vote for and serve as elected members of the Council, which meant that “VIMGA could nominate members for any position on Council.”¹³

A further move toward independence occurred in January 2006 when the Steering Committee decided that their own forms should be used to record volunteer hours, not those inherited from MGABC. Also in 2006, VIMGA put in a request to MGABC for modification of a bylaw

¹² Gene Freott/Jen Morris February 27, 2002.

¹³ Minutes, September 18, 2004

amendment that would change the way delegates are allocated for council. It appears that for the next two years, from 2006-2008, VIMGA's relationship with MGABC would be significantly affected by the transition MGABC was itself undergoing. From being an arm of VanDusen Botanical Gardens, and thus essentially a local chapter, it was reaching out to evolve into a provincial umbrella organization for all chapters, including Vancouver/VanDusen. VIMGA and other chapters were caught up in the confusion of disentangling what aspects of their activity would or should be locally determined and what aspects needed to meet standards that applied to all chapters. Taking on such jobs required patience, time and a willingness to attend a lot of meetings!

Standards that might apply to all or might more logically be determined locally included such matters as: what can count as volunteer hours; what are the responsibilities of members of the executive; how are clinics to be recorded and evaluated; how is membership to be determined; what happens if a member wants a leave of absence; how are students to be vetted for acceptance into the training program; what are the expectations of graduating students; where can clinics be offered; what constitutes advice hours, administration, and education hours; and how to acknowledge long service and retirement.

When MGABC proposed in January 2008 to introduce a handbook that would apply to all chapters in the province, VIMGA considered that initiative very problematic. Janet Sawatsky and Pam Harrison led the discussions with MGABC and, despite some setbacks and controversy managed to arrive eventually to mutually agreed terms for their relationship. The objective was to assert and retain local control over activities that were affected by local conditions and needs. One requirement, for instance, had been that members of MGABC must also be members of a botanical garden. While such a requirement was feasible for both Vancouver and Victoria members, no such garden was available to VIMGA at that time. Also among the by-laws was a requirement that voting on the provincial council would be restricted to representatives who were physically present at meetings. VIMGA members viewed that requirement as discriminating against chapters distant, as they were, from Vancouver. Decisions could be made that affected their activity over which they had no control.

One area of strong disagreement, which also had more than local implications, was the use of the title Master Gardener. VIMGA appealed to MGABC to take action to protect the title from being used by other institutions in any gardening courses that did not require volunteer work. At this time, a program set up by the Gaia College in Duncan was offering an organic gardening course that advertised itself as a course for training ‘organic master gardeners’. While the course itself focused on exemplary gardening practices, there was no component requiring graduates to volunteer to offer gardening information to the public.

The volunteer work is central to what it means to be a master gardener as understood by MGABC and all associated organizations. The VIMGA executive felt strongly that a misleading message was being offered the public and eventual students in the Gaia program. “Organic Master Gardener”, however, became a registered trademark of Gaia College and VIMGA’s challenge was not successful. MGABC did not support any action and a letter to the Gaia program’s director, Heide Hermary, met with no sympathy. At about the same time, realizing that should the Gaia organic master gardeners choose to incorporate, they might lose the right to use their name, Vancouver Island Master Gardeners Association, the VIMGA Executive moved quickly to incorporate under the Society Act in 2009 using Linda Derkach’s draft of a Constitution and Bylaws.

Janet Sawatsky resigned from MGABC in May 2008 and VIMGA was left with no representation until September 2008 when Pam Harrison and Linda Derkach came forward to share the position. Their participation in the provincial organization added significantly not only to VIMGA’s visibility as a strong chapter but also to the clarification of processes for all chapters. Linda had already served in several different roles in VIMGA. As an MGIT, in Fall 2004, she immediately joined the Executive and became a Master Planner, a role she held for 5 years. Once she joined the MGABC, she became Vice-president Education and worked with a committee to write the provincial Guidelines for the Basic Training Program: Standards and Requirements which was ratified in 2010 in a formal agreement. Linda recognized the value of MGABC as a provincial organization and to help its development, wrote provincial bylaws that reflected its values and goals: six independent and equal chapters coming together under the umbrella of the provincial council to share and learn together, with guiding provincial standards

and requirements. The by-laws instantiated a new relationship between the provincial council and local chapters and are reflected in the Policy Manual. As a consequence of this ongoing work, Linda has continued to focus on policy development for the province.

VIMGA is currently represented on the MGABC by Karen Bennett. Karen joined VIMGA in 2008 and immediately became Secretary. That role was quite challenging since she knew few of the people involved and none of the history. But, undeterred, she then became VIMGA president, and between 2011 and 2014 took on a number of initiatives to help a somewhat limping organization. Few members were coming forward to take on responsibilities, either on the Executive or in their regional groups. With the support and active help of long-term members, Angela Einarson, Pam Harrison and Linda Derkach, she managed to encourage greater participation and better communication. During her term of office, policies were introduced to structure a Continuing Education Committee, to award lifetime memberships, and to refine policies on Leaves of Absence and options for volunteering. In 2014, she became VIMGA's representative on MGABC and in 2016, was elected its President.

Before Karen, as a VIMGA member, became President of MGABC, perhaps the strongest affirmation of VIMGA's place in the provincial organization was the holding of the Annual General Meeting in Nanaimo on October 20, 2012. This major event required months of planning and involved considerable anxiety about its success in attracting excellent speakers and happy participants. The Victoria Master Gardener Association collaborated with VIMGA and the 2012 Conference 'Best of the West – a celebration of Best Gardening Practices' included well-known speakers: Cass Turnbull from Seattle on pruning, Harry Jongerden, Vancouver - Garden Director, VanDusen Botanical Garden "21st Century Botanical Gardens: Communities for Conservation, Dr. Linda Gilkeson, SaltSpring Island - well respected writer, teacher and consultant on pest management "Common Pests & Diseases on the Coast: Diagnosis & Management Without Pesticides" and, in a special evening program, Internationally renowned garden design expert Lucy Hardiman, Portland, who spoke on "Full Frontal Gardens: Gone the Lawn". Like all such conferences, it also included Plant Vendors, Artisans, a Silent Auction, and featured speakers' books: people and materials that had to be decided upon, contacted and organized. The event was a great success, attracting over 140 participants mainly, from up and

down Vancouver Island including VIMGA members, but also a significant number from the public.

VIMGA and Vancouver Island University (Malaspina)

As well as managing the relationship with the changing ‘mother’ organization in Vancouver, VIMGA had also had to develop a strong working relationship with its educational host institute, Malaspina University College which later became Vancouver Island University (VIU). Tensions and disagreements had arisen as early as 2004 when it appeared that a course might be offered at Malaspina without the involvement of MGs. VIMGA was faced with a dilemma: Malaspina College Nanaimo advertised a new MG course without involving them in planning or selecting content. At this point also, VIMGA were concerned that more students would be trained than could be accommodated in high quality clinics; they decided to ask that the course be cancelled. Veterans like Sally Shivers, Pam Harrison, Heide Hermary and Jenny Morris felt strongly that Island MGs needed to be both consulted and included in any training program. Although Janet Germann supported the MGs goal of preparing volunteer gardeners, she had to represent the college’s priority of attracting students in order to run a viable and profitable course and not setting up unduly restrictive requirements for enrolment. Malaspina/VIU is first and foremost a liberal arts university catering to a wide range of educational clientele and their needs. The teaching organizations based in VanDusen and the Horticultural Centre for the Pacific were both dedicated to gardening education and were gardens first. The training of master gardeners fit almost naturally within their mandate which was much more compatible with the goals of the MG program than was, and is, the mandate of the university. Offering a non-credit gardening course fell well within the interests of the university. But unlike most non-credit courses, in this case, an outside organization wanted to influence significant aspects of the gardening course. Asserting that influence required considerable patience and effort. The MGs wanted to have some control over enrolment, to incorporate the MG aspects from the beginning of each course, to have a hand in who was hired to teach the course, to keep some standards in homework and exam completion (not a usual requirement for a general interest community non-credit course), in general to make it different from a general gardening course.

Accepting any student who applied led to some dilemmas for instructors. Pam Harrison recalls that someone's nanny was put into the course so that her employer could make a claim from the government. The woman did not speak English and had no interest in gardening. In another case, a handicapped person was enrolled who required having a family member present at all times. Possibly that person would meet the university's need to demonstrate inclusivity but he was an unlikely candidate for the program. A first nations student had a large subsidy to fulfil an educational requirement but had no intention of ever volunteering. Someone's alcohol problem caused discomfort at a clinic. Not all such cases could be anticipated but VIMGA wanted to avoid problems as far as possible.

Progress was made. By September 2007, VIMGA had renamed its Advisory Committee as the Program Management Committee, thereby better indicating its mandate, and together with the Malaspina Coordinator, was moving steadily toward a service agreement. At Malaspina, a new committee was to be formed that would include both members of VIMGA and Malaspina and the course instructor. A modification in the curriculum accepted by all was also proposed: a Plant Identification project would be added as a new component and requirement for MG certification. The agreement was signed and accepted by both parties in January 2011, renewable in December 2013.

Not surprisingly, unanticipated issues arose during the five years after that first formal agreement. By 2013, many core areas were identified as needing amendment: advertising, hiring of facilitator, choice of course material, use of external experts as speakers. Also for discussion: attendance requirements for certification; auditing to make up time.¹⁴ It was VIU's responsibility to advertise the course but VIMGA wanted to add avenues that more directly reached gardeners. One of the facilitators hired for the course had failed to



¹⁴ Minutes November 2013

follow the established guidelines with the result that students felt short-changed and VIMGA had no recourse for making restitution. A new version of the course text that originated in Washington State had been developed. It was an attractive text but omitted key concepts and was considerably more expensive. Though it was adopted on a trial basis for a year, VIMGA members subsequently did a careful comparison with the old text to determine which better served their course needs. They also consulted colleagues in chapters around the province to check on what texts they were using and how satisfied they were. The outcome was that they adopted the new text but used chapters from the old text on two missing topics: propagation and invasive species. Although invasive species had always been a concern, by 2013 much new information had accumulated and was an essential for the basic training, as was information about developments in organic methods of pest control. Course materials always need to be current with relevant research. Since external speakers make an essential contribution to the course and that need for currency, VIMGA wanted to be more closely involved in their selection and evaluation. They proposed a list of names for the course topics. At a procedural level, the matter of attendance requirements for certification needed to be confirmed and upheld by the facilitator, which required some level of supervision by VIU, as did the implementation of a policy regarding auditing to make up time. After multiple drafts and multiple meetings between VIMGA representatives and Nancy Hamilton at VIU, a new agreement was put in place for a further three years, signed in May 2015.¹⁵

Clinic planning and requirements and support of new volunteers

The Basic Training Course established common ground for the volunteer work of the Master Gardeners in Training (MGITs). The next step was initiating them into that volunteer work which always began with clinics, scheduled sessions at venues such as garden centres, plant sales, and community gardens where the MGs and MGITs would be available to answer questions from the public and thus be sharing well-informed advice. Clinics have been the traditional heart of the MG program. Small tips helped new MGITs: Paul Lawry, for instance, drew up a list of the most frequently asked questions that was sent to all members. Materials to

¹⁵ Minutes November 2013

assist in their smooth and easy operation have been added over the years. In 2010 each area was provided with clinic bags stocked with fact sheets on topics such as composting, likely to be of concern to the public, a tablecloth, pencils, notepad, and a laminated sign urging passers-by *Gardening Questions - Ask Us!* As well, sandwich boards for each area drew attention to the presence of Master Gardeners at a clinic venue. In 2015, bags were added to with cards for distribution to promote VIMGA services – 1000 cards were printed: “Helping Gardeners Grow.” Volunteers also have been helped by a constantly reviewed approach to planning and signing up for clinics. Sign-up days early in the year include time for social interaction and time for learning from speakers who bring new ideas on timely topics of interest. A small crew of volunteers canvases venues in the community and the Master Planner draws up a comprehensive list of clinic possibilities. Many other kinds of opportunity for volunteer service have emerged over the years, however, and the dominance of the clinic model has attracted discussion of alternatives. As early as 2005, Sally Shivers wrote guidelines for evaluating community events in which MGs could participate as volunteers. These “*Volunteer Activity*” review forms enabled MGs to claim advice hours outside regularly scheduled clinics. The activity had to meet VIMGA standards and philosophy. Angela Einarson took responsibility for evaluating such proposals and among the over 30 submitted to date, some highly successful activities included involvement with Care Homes, working with Community Garden/greenhouse groups, planning demonstration gardens, mentoring school programs and supporting a Facebook group. Clinic participation has remained the principle vehicle for volunteer work, nonetheless, until quite recently. Conditions for advice-giving have changed. Nurseries are better preparing and training staff who offer expertise. Search engines on the Internet provide multiple immediate and usually useful information, much illustrated with videos on UTube. MGs have found themselves spending many hours fielding few questions and some venues have been dropped from the previous lists. Creating opportunities for advice hours remains a challenge for organizers. Most alternative opportunities seem to emerge on an ad hoc basis and some are not continuous to subsequent years. At a day-long “think-tank” in November 2012, members proposed a variety of alternatives: workshops at garden centres or garden club meetings, guidance at community gardens, therapeutic horticulture, community outreach at Seniors centres such as Cedar Woods,

Milner Gardens and Woodland shoots with roots program, tours for plant identification at sites like Milner, creating displays at fairs and trade shows, securing TV or radio spots, assisting newcomers to an area, advising at school gardens, and participating in a consulting role on HORT lines. This last possibility, as of April 2016, is now underway through Milner Gardens.

Successfully moving into an alternative, however, requires considerable initiative and some persistence on the part of the MG. Since qualified MGs are required to do only 15 hours of advice a year, the simplest route is to do clinics, despite the fact that other kinds of engagement might be more rewarding. The challenge for diversifying, therefore, remains.

Mentorship program

A mentorship program was started in 2006. Both the Van Dusen and Oregon programs offered ideas of how to recruit and organize mentors but the VIMGA mentorship committee preferred to develop an in-house model. In July 2005, the mentorship committee made a proposal to the VIMGA Executive and the Malaspina Advisory Committee summarizing their preferred model and methods. They suggested a focus on facilitating “the formation of little teams comprised of a mentor and 2-4 new students to work on relationship building and to spread the Association’s goals”¹⁶ The challenge then was to find volunteers among certified MGs. Mentoring offered them an opportunity to review the course since they would attend classes throughout and, for the new students, having mentors would enhance the value of the course and MGIT interest in the volunteering aspects of the whole program. In August 2006, decisions were made on: the general roles and responsibilities of mentors; the process for finding, choosing and training mentors; the process for crediting of advice hours to mentors.¹⁷ On September 13, 2006, Barb Kohlman, course facilitator, ran a training session for mentors, reviewing roles and responsibilities. Students responded positively to the pilot program and recommended more ‘hands on’ presentation, clearer consistency with MG philosophy, and uniform quality of speakers. In 2009, mentors offered mock clinics as a way to initiate new MGITs into what they could expect at a clinic and how they could effectively respond to the public.

¹⁶ Report to General meeting March 22, 2006

¹⁷ Pam Harrison August 17, 2006

As Lead Mentor in 2015, Paul Lawry affirmed the value of the program. Mentors are available during classes to guide and be available whenever the student has questions. Mentors clarify the steps necessary to becoming a Master Gardener and the purpose and requirements of assignments. A lead mentor is in contact with the mentors throughout the two-year course, and tries to monitor the progress of the program and report to the VIMGA executive. He urged encouraging students and reminding them to seek their mentors help if they needed it. Students have been very appreciative of this feature of the program and 4 of them volunteered to serve as mentors in the next class.

Education

Even when a fledgling association, the Master Gardeners who found each other on Vancouver Island, were early concerned about their own learning. Education has always been a priority; becoming a Master Gardener signalled a passion for knowing more, not a signal that all there is to know about gardening had been mastered. In 2002, the MGs held plant sales that enabled



them to have education sessions. In September 2003, the Ad hoc Committee added education hours to the requirements for an MG: 5 hours in year two for trainees and 5 for certified MGs. In September 2005, the VIMGA Steering Committee decided on having a Continuing Education Committee to

propose training seminars and workshops for VIMGA members.

By 2005, all 3 regional areas reported increased activity for their members, bringing people together for interesting and educational trips and lectures that included social time for establishing bonds and friendships across the areas. Education hours could also include



leading a tour or going on a tour for a one hour education credit. Despite an interest in initiating a Master Gardeners Advanced Training Program on the Island, to match the one offered at Van Dusen, the committee recognized that this would not be a viable venture and instead proposed 1) financial aid for the Advanced Training Program at VanDusen and for 2) local stand-alone inservice and short courses.¹⁸

At the Executive Meeting in January, 2006, the Continuing Education Committee (CEC) urged making greater use of the educational opportunities which already existed on the Island and suggested making a list of options to distribute to members.¹⁹ Following up on their commitments, the Committee arranged a Disease Workshop for April 26th that quickly filled and an Insect workshop for September 16th. They also provided a list of courses and workshops offered on the Island as well as noted useful websites for members to consult.

VIMGA members' response to these educational opportunities were further affirmed by feedback on meetings that suggested the emphasis be on education not "business". In October 2007, an Education Day was proposed to replace the Spring Meeting. At such education days, topics could include: Fire smart landscaping; Horticultural therapy; Growing food; and Fruit trees with speakers drawn from all over the Island. In order to encourage and support local areas in education projects, VIMGA decided in January 2010 to allocate \$10 per member and in the case of Duncan at that time, to assist with \$150 for a workshop, with a caveat to encourage cost recovery.



To provide some practical help to members as well as an educational opportunity, Leigh Winters and Diane Sharpe suggested a series of mini-workshops with outlines and materials that members could use at

¹⁸ Pam Harrison August 17, 2006

¹⁹ Appendix B p. 10 Minutes January 22, 2006

clinics for the 2011 Spring Education Day.

Such workshops could also be offered at clinics and at the January 2011 Executive meeting, Leigh and Diane described the idea as “Train the trainer clinics.” They explained the proposed format for this clinic activity and the need to inform clinic venues that workshops offered by the attending MGs are available and ask them to assist by publicizing.

Despite the ongoing commitment to education and some successes in organizing educational activity, some issues had arisen about communication and it had seemed useful, by 2010, to develop clear terms of reference, a task taken on by Linda Derkach. A new committee would oversee, coordinate and promote educational activities for members and be responsible to the Executive who had the mandate to make decisions. One of the terms was that the Committee Chair liaise with the Executive by attending meetings but this requirement met with firm opposition from the committee at the May 2011 Executive meeting. Differences in expectations and understanding between the VIMGA executive and the committee had exacerbated problems in communication. The committee felt that minor decisions were being changed by the executive and they wanted more flexibility. Patricia Cuttriss drafted minutes from the May 27th meeting of the CEC which were responded to in detail by members of the executive.²⁰ Members of the CEC did not want to continue serving into the next year.

Leigh Winters, however, agreed to liaise until the next meeting in the Fall. There was a concern that the committee had been unable to attract members to serve and that without members, it would fail. To follow up and resolve the conflict, a meeting was scheduled for June 29th between 3 members of the CEC and 3 of the executive to discuss the terms of reference for the CEC and the AGM and Spring Education Day programs. A chair of CEC and Director were considered to be essential. For the Fall Education Day, it was again emphasized that a committee chair was needed to “holds things together.”²¹ Revised Terms of Reference for the committee were adopted.

²⁰ Patricia Cuttriss and Exec bid

²¹ Minutes September 16, 2011

In 2012, such difficulties with a significant aspect of VIMGA's mission was one of the many challenges facing new President Karen Bennett. VIMGA was suffering from a loss of members and thus of revenue. Instead of funds going only into education, it was recognized that funds would need to go to General Revenue and be made available to other needs. VIMGA seemed to be at a critical point where members needed to make decisions about their commitment. There were issues of a shrinking membership and the advent of potentially competing similar organizations. Dennis Ponto, as Chair of the Program Management committee, prepared a series of questions and asked members to respond as fully as possible and to involve themselves in helping determine how to enhance and sustain the program of which they are part.²² The AGM that fall took the form of the Think Tank already mentioned above and since that time, there has continued to be an expansion of the opportunities for different approaches to advice hours, as described earlier.

While the membership has not significantly increased and seems to stabilize between 50 and 60 members, the influx of newly trained and enthusiastic people from the 2015 Basic Course has meant that, in 2016, the prospects for the future of the organization look promising. Indeed, it is still the case that VIMGA's very existence and its continued development is an inspiring story of individuals' perseverance, caring and effort. We have every reason to be confident for the future. The appeal of gardening and the passion for gardening and for sharing that passion with other gardeners is evident at every VIMGA gathering.

In her history of women gardeners, Catherine Horwood²³ notes that "Gertrude Jekyll, or the 'Queen of Spades' as she was called when receiving her RHS Victoria Medal of Honour in 1897, believed that the appeal of gardening lay in giving 'happiness and repose of mind, firstly, and above all other considerations, and to give it through the presentation of the best kind of pictorial beauty of flower and foliage that can be combined or invented.'" And, perhaps VIMGA gardeners can also find common ground with the creator of Sissinghurst, Vita Sackville-West, who "like her readers, saw herself as an amateur in an endless and surprising pursuit. They might well know more than she did and they could help one another on the way."²⁴

²² Dennis Ponto in Minutes, November 4, 2012

²³ Catherine Horwood "Gardening Women: their stories from 1600 to the present" Virago Press, 2010

²⁴ Robin Lane Fox, "Vita-Sackville West" Michael Joseph Ltd, 1986

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