



Crops
IN PEACE
AND WAR

POD-LITE

The Book of
Yew

Arctic sage, rosemary and thyme

Story by LJ Evans
Photos by LJ Evans and Todd Paris

Harvest day in the herb beds

The nip of fall is in the air as the gardeners bend to their work, wreaking havoc as they rip out the pungent plants one by one.

“Anybody want some Kentucky colonel mint?” Emily Reiter calls out. “Great stuff for your mint juleps,” she says with a grin.

A half-dozen volunteers are reaping the results of their labor, harvesting the Georgeson Botanical Garden’s herbs, all selected, planted and tended by the Herb Bunch, a loosely organized group of avid gardeners.

Marsha Munsell is stripping the plants out of the thyme and oregano bed, sown in June with at least 16 different kinds of the classic culinary and ornamental herbs. First to go are the thyme plants — leaves, stems, roots and all — with names like creeping, English broadleaf, German winter, Spanish, lemon, elfin, English, lime and orange balsam. Then she starts on the oreganos — Italian, Kent beauty, Greek and Syrian. Munsell carefully collects a few sprigs of each variety in labeled plastic bags for evaluation later. What the Herb Bunch volunteers don’t take home to preserve or use in their kitchens will go in the Georgeson compost piles.

Reiter and a couple others are taking apart the mint bed. Besides the Kentucky Colonel, there are also vigorous plants of chocolate mint, pineapple mint, spearmint, pennyroyal and lemon balm. As the plants are handled and the leaves bruised, the aroma from each bundle is distinctive — some robust, some delicate — but filling the air with a potent bouquet that leaves no mistake — these flora are cultivated first and foremost for their scent.

A few steps away is an oblong bed this year planted entirely with scented geraniums. They’re all luxuriant,

burgeoning — some of them have grown to three and four feet tall. Rub their fuzzy, jagged-edge leaves and the air is redolent with the smell of roses, chocolate, apples, oranges, even coconuts, and the most heady of all, citronella, said to repel mosquitoes (a popular attribute in an Alaska garden), whose scent is right at the edge of being stinky. Donna Dinsmore, her eyes shielded from the bright, low-angled September sun by wide dark glasses, is saving at least one plant of each variety, cutting back the stems and leaves and carefully planting each one in a green plastic pot. Each container gets its red identifying label stuck in the soil, so Georgeson staff can keep track of them in the greenhouse over the winter.



Getting down and dirty: the Herb Bunch meets to plant seedlings in the Dorothy Truran Memorial Herb Garden in June 2011.

Each plot in the clutch of oval and round raised beds is outlined with rocks. This year half of the largest one was planted with the thymes and oreganos. The other half was planted with Japanese herbs, leafy vegetables and seasoning plants such as purple shiso, mioga ginger, sansho, green shiso, mizuna, mitsuba, and in the middle, a few pepper plants that were supposed to grow fiery, tiny chili peppers. The pepper plants grew but made no chilies. The ginger all died, and the



Mapping it out: sketches of the planting layouts for the herb beds help volunteers plan their attack.

Virginia Damron (left), Shaundra Robinson and Virginia Morral discuss the fine points of planting seedlings in the bed of Japanese herbs.



horticulturists digging in that bed can find only stubby, dried-up corpses.

Part of the point of growing these plants is to learn, and one lesson this year is that not all of them will thrive so far north. Experimenting is half the fun and the core of the serious business of this garden.

The Georgeson's roots

The Georgeson Botanical Garden, like the Herb Bunch, has its roots in a few people who shared their deep-seated enthusiasm for gardening with others.

In 1905, citizens of the Fairbanks area petitioned the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to establish an experiment station in the Tanana Valley. Charles Christian Georgeson, already director of the Alaska Agricultural Experiment Stations, explored the Tanana Valley for possible sites.

Georgeson selected 1,394 acres alongside the narrow-gauge Tanana

Mines Railroad that ran between Chena, Fairbanks and the gold fields 20 miles to the northwest. He chose the site so that people going by on the train would see that useful plants in gardens and fields could survive in Alaska's Interior. Early work at the experiment station emphasized grains, grasses and potatoes, but there were always plots of vegetables, flowers, fruits and landscape plants for public viewing.

By 1975, in the middle of the trans-Alaska oil pipeline boom, tour companies were looking for good places to take tourists. They started bringing them to the Fairbanks

Experiment Farm demonstration gardens, which was a huge hit. The whole garden area was planted every year as variety trials, says Pat Holloway, the botanical garden's director.

"[It was] rows and rows and rows of vegetables with a few flowers in front," Holloway says. "There were no labels anywhere and only rudimentary paths. The tour buses started showing up and the people loved it, but there were lots of reasons this was not an ideal situation, including the possibility of people getting hurt on muddy, slippery paths."

It got to the point by the late 1980s that with so many buses coming, something had to be done. Either the safety situation had to be improved or they were going to have to close the gardens to the public. Holloway proposed

“Somebody came up with the name — the Herb Bunch — and we were off and running.”

transforming that part of the experiment farm into a botanical garden.

To create a proper botanical garden from scratch is a complicated task. Holloway and her team had some ideas about what the garden should consist of but they didn't have all the skills to design it. Enter Tom Gallagher, a registered landscape architect who was then a professor of resources management in the School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences. Holloway and her crew explained all the things they wanted the garden to include, and a few weeks later Gallagher came back with the concepts.

"The foundation of Georgeson Botanical Garden to this



Virginia Morral, left, sizes up a chili pepper plant to go in the center of the Japanese bed.

Donna Dinsmore enjoys the camaraderie and sunshine on harvest day.



day is Tom Gallagher's design," Holloway says.

Open to the public since 1989, the redesigned garden continues to be a valuable source of information on varieties of flowers, vegetables and ornamental plants that will flourish in Fairbanks, a resource for commercial growers as well as home gardeners, and a major attraction for tourists. More than 30,000 visitors enjoy the gardens each summer.

The herb lady

Barbara Fay is the person most responsible for the herb garden section of the Georgeson. Her love of herbs started with her Polish grandmother, an avid gardener who

would tuck a sprig of rosemary, basil or thyme in her granddaughter's braids.

"I would go all around all day with this wonderful smell," Barb says. "I told myself whenever I'm grown up and have a garden of my own, that's what I'm going to plant."

When Barb and her husband, Bud, moved to Fairbanks in 1967 and she finally had a place to grow things, she knew almost nothing about gardening, much less growing herbs. She took gardening classes everywhere in town she could find them, but was disappointed that none of the instructors talked about herbs.

She ended up having to teach herself. She tried intriguing plants in her vegetable garden and learned that many herbs that were perennial in other parts of the world would not survive the winter in Fairbanks' subarctic climate. She assembled a library of herb books and subscribed to herb magazines. Eventually, through trial and error, and somewhat by default, she became the Fairbanks herb expert.

People were interested and wanted to know more, so she and a friend taught classes in their homes on using culinary herbs in cooking. They gathered seven or eight people and served a five-course dinner featuring gourmet

dishes seasoned with fresh herbs. Their students loved it, sometimes hanging around after a three-hour class to talk until late at night.

"I think it was partly that I was so enthused about herbs," Fay says. "Other people picked up some of that enthusiasm. Most of them knew about parsley because it appeared on their plate in a restaurant, but that was about it."

She started working with Holloway soon after the botanical garden opened. Fay volunteered to grow herbs and teach classes at GBG.

The herb garden started as just one row in the culinary garden, but each year the herb patch got a little bigger. After a few years Holloway suggested they use a bequest

Shaundra Robinson tends the Japanese herbs during a mid-summer weeding session.



from Dorothy Truran, a well-loved local gardener and a Georgeson supporter, to design and build a formal herb garden. The herb beds in the garden today are the result.

By 2002, even with help from friends, Fay felt overwhelmed. Clearly there was a broad and eager audience for information about herbs, but meeting that need was too much work for one or two people. She proposed to several herb enthusiasts that they start an informal group to meet monthly to learn, share experiences, and plan and manage the herb beds at the Georgeson.

"Somebody came up with the name — the Herb Bunch — and we were off and running," Fay says.

The people in the group — some of them experienced gardeners, some novices — volunteered to design the plantings, put in the order of seeds and plants through the Georgeson, plant, weed and maintain the beds during the summer, and harvest the herbs in the fall. That is pretty much the way it has been ever since. Some of the Herb Bunch volunteers today have been involved since the group's inception.

Holloway says that although hundreds of volunteer hours make it possible for Georgeson to keep going every year, there is only one other group of organized volunteers who maintain a whole section of the garden.

"There are people who adopt a single bed. There are mystery weeders who come at night," Holloway laughs, but they work at the direction of a Georgeson staff member. Except for the spinners and weavers club, which tends the dye plants, and another group that comes every Wednesday afternoon all summer to work wherever needed, the Herb Bunch is the only group that manages its own section of the garden.



"Barb Fay ended up leading things like the Herb Bunch because she is a take-charge kind of person," says Holloway.

"A lot of the ideas that resulted in herb classes or herbs planted in the botanical garden originated with Barb. She was passionate about cooking and that was where her major interest with the herbs originated."

One of the most extraordinary things Fay would do was take something very simple that came out of a carton or a can and turn it into a gourmet dish by adding herbs, Holloway says. And she wasn't stingy with them, either.

"Instead of measuring out a teaspoon she would take a handful of oregano and flop it into the dish," Holloway says. "She totally, completely changed the way I cook!"

Herbs on the balcony

A few years ago health issues led Barb Fay to relocate near her daughter on Bainbridge Island, Wash.

"I still consider myself a member of the Herb Bunch — I'm always available on the phone," Fay says, and she is always copied on the emails that remind everyone of the next get-together to plant, weed or harvest.

Fay's ardent interest in growing things has not abated, even though now she lives in a third-floor condominium. In August 2011 she struggled to list all the plants spilling from containers on her two balconies or in four hydroponic units inside the apartment. She grows flowers and a few vegetables like beans, sugar snap peas and lettuce, and of course herbs: dill, lemon basil, Genovese basil, marjoram, spearmint, peppermint and chocolate mint, nasturtiums, lemon thyme, sage, oregano, tarragon, stevia, lemon verbena and rosemary.

"But I don't really need to grow my own rosemary," she



Virginia Damron, left, regales the group with stories after harvesting and cleaning out the herb beds in September.

Minty-fresh weeds: Holly Buzby diligently performs the fragrant job of weeding in the bed of mints.

said. "It's a perennial here and there's so much planted around town, I go out with little clippers, and as I'm walking to the library I just take a snip here and a snip there."

What shall we grow next year?

The Herb Bunch is gathered again, except this time indoors. It is the last week in October, and as is the case every month, the meeting begins with all present chowing down on potluck dishes mostly made with, or at least seasoned by, something from everyone's garden. Then commences the business of planning next year's herb gardens at the Georgeson.

"What worked and what didn't?" asks Virginia Damron, one of the people who took over organizing the monthly meetings after Barb Fay moved away.

"Some things in the Japanese bed bolted really quick. The mizuna went right to seed," someone calls out.

"One of the things that went horribly wrong were the oreganos and thymes," Marsha Munsell remarks. "We didn't get the labels in soon enough, and they grew so fast and bushy, when I came back later to weed I couldn't tell them apart. It was hard to tell what was chickweed and what was herb!"

"When I got there to do the labeling I couldn't identify them even right at the beginning," Holloway said. "Next year when you get the beds planted why don't you give me a map so trying to figure out where the signs should go isn't such a problem."

Someone suggests a bed with all the plants you can use to make herbal teas. A collection of Russian herbs is proposed, noting that theme would take a little research.

A bed of traditional early American herb plants is considered; this is something they did several years ago — it was a big success and would be worth doing again.

"It would be good to have a list by year of what we've grown," says Munsell, and someone volunteers to take that on.

Eventually all the herb bed themes are decided upon, with volunteers' names attached to each one. In more meetings over the course of the winter the group will pore over seed catalogs and herb books to decide on the varieties to order. The list will make its way to Pat Holloway and her staff, seeds will be ordered, the Georgeson staff will start them in tiny plastic pots in the greenhouse, and the whole cycle will have made its way around to the beginning again.

On an afternoon in early June, the Herb Bunch will assemble to once again tenderly transplant a thoughtfully chosen assortment of edible and aromatic plants into the soil, sharing delight in the dirt and the good things that grow there.

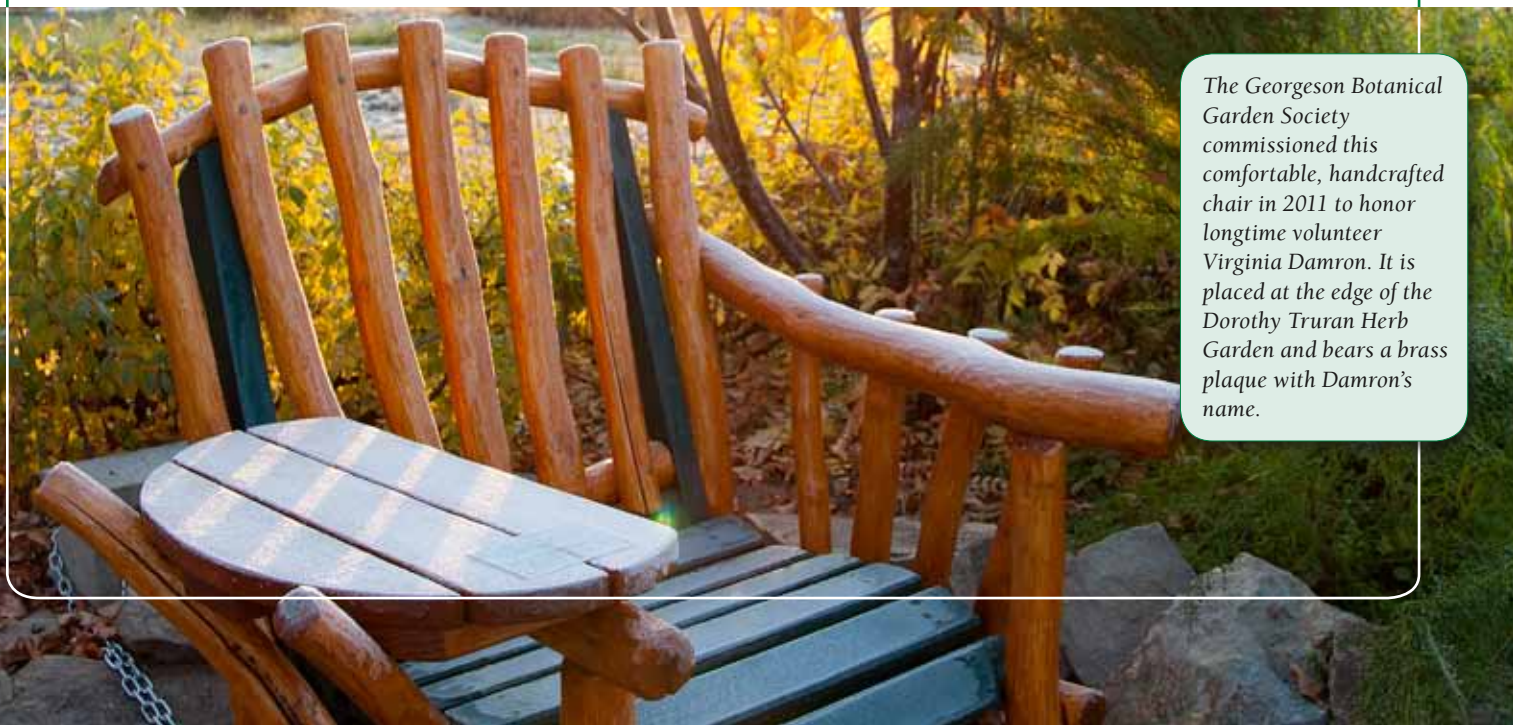


LJ Evans, who used this story as an excuse to learn more about growing herbs herself, is a writer and editor for UAF Marketing and Communications.

UAF alumnae in this story: Donna Dinsmore, '81; Emily Reiter, '96, '02



Learn about the culinary and medicinal uses of some herbs that grow in Alaska at www.uaf.edu/aurora/.



The Georgeson Botanical Garden Society commissioned this comfortable, handcrafted chair in 2011 to honor longtime volunteer Virginia Damron. It is placed at the edge of the Dorothy Truran Herb Garden and bears a brass plaque with Damron's name.