



The Flower Arrangements

at Historic Garden Week

Story by Mary C. Foley
Photos courtesy of
Garden Club of Virginia

The advent of Historic Garden Week is a sure signal spring has arrived in Virginia. Each year more than 30,000 guests enjoy 32 tours featuring more than 200 private homes and public landmarks. Known as “America’s Largest Open House,” Historic Garden Week in Virginia is the oldest and largest statewide event of its kind in the nation.

A coordinated effort of 3,400 volunteers from 42 Garden Club of Virginia (GCV) groups, Historic Garden Week is the largest volunteer event in Virginia. What makes Historic Garden Week tours so popular year after year? According to Chumura, an economic consulting firm in Richmond, guests buy tickets because they want to 1) see historical locations rarely

open to the public, 2) tour private homes, 3) visit superb gardens and 4) enjoy all the flower arrangements.

Indeed, Historic Garden Week is rightly famous for the 2,000 professional-quality floral arrangements on display every year. Each property on the tour features a dozen or more floral displays created by members of local garden clubs using plant materials from their own gardens. Garden club arrangers meet with each homeowner many months in advance to identify the location of each arrangement and determine the style, size, container and color palette that best complements the home and the homeowner’s taste. Care is taken to put federal-style arrangements in a federal style home and contemporary arrangements in a modern home. Efforts are also made to incorporate the homeowners’ favorite flowers, use their containers and reflect their personal styles to make each arrangement fit naturally into its setting.

Guests will find fresh floral arrangements adorning mantelpieces, on dining room tables, tucked into powder rooms, flanking front doorways, gracing hallways and hanging outside on garden gates. Because the plant material comes





from local gardens, the arrangements are different every year, depending on what is in bloom. Traditionally, daffodils play a big role. The GCV estimates almost 6,000 daffodils are used each year in these arrangements. Tulips, azaleas and iris are also favorite plant materials. If spring is late, then peonies and lilacs may take center stage.

The arrangements are created the day before each tour. More experienced arrangers work alongside newcomers to ensure each arrangement has that wow factor guests have come to expect. Last-minute preparation is necessary to ensure the freshest flowers; however, last-minute arranging on this scale can also be the source of much hectic activity right before the big day. Anne Vanderwarker, a member of the Dolley Madison Garden Club and founder of the online flower-arranging website Fearless Flowers, is a veteran of more than a dozen Historic Garden Week tours both as a homeowner and as a head arranger. She says there are three keys to successful garden week arrangements: "All the plant materials must be conditioned properly, extra stems of each type of flower need to be kept in reserve in case of an emergency and someone must be on hand very early the day of the tour to refresh, tweak and perfect each arrangement in the moments before the doors open."

The skill and the art apparent in these showpieces are the product of many





years of learning and hands-on training that is a regular part of GCV activities. Each club submits an inter-club floral arrangement to be formally judged at the annual rose, lily and daffodil shows. Most clubs also have a flower-arranging committee that teaches techniques designed to stretch each member's comfort zone and instill the confidence to tackle a large arrangement to be seen by thousands of people. For club members who are particularly interested in this art, there is also a Flower Arranging School run by the Garden Club of Virginia that graduates flower-show judges. To become a judge, an arranger must be a blue ribbon winner in her or his own right and pass both written and practical examinations. These graduates become the cornerstone of floral artistry within GCV.

Whether you prefer traditional or contemporary, formal or informal, floral or vegetable, large or small, dramatic or sweet, the floral arrangements during Historic Garden Week offer something to please every tour guest. Next time you take a Historic Garden Week tour, look closely at these beautiful floral creations.

The 2015 Historic Garden Week will be held April 18–25. For more information on this year's tours and to buy tickets, visit www.vagardenweek.org

When not serving nonprofit organizations as a fundraising consultant, Mary C. Foley can be found in her garden or hard at work for the Dolley Madison Garden Club.