

Branching Out: Getting to know your fellow club members

Monica Foley

Member since 2016

What kind of gardening do you do? Or prefer?

I want my gardens to be attractive, sustainable and support the pollinators and other wildlife. Composting is important to me and is part of carbon sequestration so I have four compost bins. My husband and I added more than 2000 pounds of finished cow manure to our soil last year. I do winter sowing every winter to start seeds. I enjoy a focus on perennial gardening, floral design, making botanical products and sharing plants with friends. My latest project is turning the birdhouse bottle gourds I grew last summer into real birdhouses.

When did you start gardening? What drew you to it?

I was lucky to grow up in a neighborhood in Huntington, NY that has some great gardens. We lived in an older home that had a greenhouse attached to our home. When I was about nine, I wanted to plant some seeds in the greenhouse so my parents fixed up some of the broken glass panes in the greenhouse and I grew nasturtiums. My neighbor Mrs. Fleming had a yard with several garden rooms, and was a member of the Nathan Hale Garden Club and they had started a junior garden club and my friend Carly Fleming and I were recruited.



Gardening is a draw for me as a way to connect to the natural world, be creative, and share my plants and knowledge with others. Although my parents were not so interested in gardening, they supported my interest in plants.

What would you like to tell the club about yourself?

My career was as a LICSW working in the field of Social Work in different settings. My first job out of BU Social Work School was at Metropolitan State Hospital.

I am retired now and thrilled to be taking ballroom dance lessons at Arthur Murray Studio in Natick. I create custom pieces of jewelry for some charity auctions and designs



for family and friends. I lived in Needham for 25 years (moved to Natick in 2014) and I am still a member of the Needham Garden Club. I am a Principal Master Gardener having taken the course in 2008. I often like to make floral designs.

How did you become involved with the Natick Garden Club?

When I moved to Natick in 2014, I decided to join the Natick Garden Club and it has been a great decision.

What is most important to you about NGC membership.

Natick Garden Club is friendly, helpful to share information, and has some great meeting topics. It is wonderful to meet new members and learn from them and see their gardens. The club members are approachable, warm and willing to reach out to others.



What would you like to see the club do that is isn't doing now?



I feel the club does a great deal already. I think the scholarship fund is a very important goal for the club and helps the younger generation. The annual plant auction is incredible and successful. I want to thank the dedicated NGC board and committee members for all their efforts to keep the club functioning during this pandemic and beyond this pandemic.



Betsy Szymczak

Member since 1998

What kind of gardening do you do? Or prefer?

I enjoy both outdoor and indoor gardening. I love growing vegetables, flowers and herbs. Last summer I started almost everything from seed. I am very keen on dahlias too. About 10 years ago I got into houseplants with an emphasis on begonias and gesneriads. African violets are gesneriads, but I don't grow them! Their cousins – Streptocarpus, Primulina, and Achimenes are a few that I enjoy. In the spring of 2019, we renovated our entire 0.28-acre yard, planted 125 trees and shrubs, got rid of 50% of the lawn and built a system of raised beds for – you guessed it – dahlias and vegetables! I wanted a garden that I could "age" into.



When did you start gardening? What drew you to it?

I grew up in Storrs, CT. My dad was a professor in the College of Agriculture at UConn. He was in the Animal Science Department; we lived on Agronomy Rd., adjacent to 200+ acres of plant science fields and greenhouses. I was very involved in 4-H, mostly the "domestic arts" cooking, sewing, crafting etc. My dad had a vegetable garden and that's where I learned to garden. I did not garden in earnest until we moved to Natick in 1983.



What would you like to tell the club about yourself: other passion(s); work (current/former/volunteer); family; gardening credentials; etc.?

I have many interests, maybe too many! I still like to do all the things I learned in 4-H; bread baking, in fact any baking has been a pandemic activity that the neighbors appreciate! I am a clinical microbiologist and for almost 40 years taught in medical laboratory science programs at Northeastern, Fitchburg State and Bunker Hill. After the anthrax attack of 2001, I spent 10 years in Public Health working on bioterrorism laboratory preparedness training. I retired from full-time teaching in 2016. My husband, Ralph, retired after 43 years as a librarian at Brandeis. Our daughter Julie (NHS 2000) lives in Philadelphia with her husband Evan.

Our son Neil (NHS 2002) lives in Maryland with his wife Renee and our grandkids Dean (6) and Eve (5). Like many of you, I have only "seen" my family on Zoom for almost a year!

As mentioned above, begonias and dahlia are plant passions. I joined the American Begonia Society (ABS) and the American Dahlia Society (ADS) and all the local chapters and then got involved in flower shows and judging. I am the ABS national judging co-chair, and ADS accredited judge and a Gesneriad Society student judge. I was accepted to the 2020 MA Master Gardener class, that was cancelled but will start, via Zoom, in March. I am also taking classes (Zoom) with the National Garden Clubs and hope to qualify as a Gardening Consultant by the end of the year.

How did you become involved with the Natick Garden Club?

I joined the club shortly after it was organized, in 1998. I joined because it was all about gardening and meetings were in the evening. I knew one of the founders, Anne Freeman, our kids were in scouting and went to Johnson School together. Then of course I got to know Marilyn (Lustig), Shirley (Fitzpatrick), Elizabeth (Carroll), Judy (Sabol), Joanne (Rampe), Sue (Shipman), and Carol (Salo). It was and is a great group.

What is most important to you about NGC membership?

What makes NGC so important is that there is a place for everybody, and all are welcome. Programming, field trips, civic engagement, conservation, commitment to the environment, philanthropy, and fellowship all contribute to an important sense of community.



What would you like to see the club do that it isn't doing now?

From an early age, children lucky enough to have parents who garden learn where food comes from and the pleasures of gardening. As an additional outreach to the community perhaps NGC could support families who want to garden but need a bit of encouragement through face-to-face workshops (post-COVID), sharing of online resources, and other activities.

(This is me!!! Cover of a book I bought one for myself and another for my sister.)

Carolyn Wirth

Member since 2018

What kind of gardening do you do? Or prefer?

At present, I have 2 small flower beds with both annuals and perennials. I grow herbs in pots and lavender in the beds. I love my dogwood, rhododendron and azalea. I started growing cucumbers in my flower beds last year and may add more veggies this year. I started to leave areas of wild black-eyed Susan's and other plants for pollinators in the side yard.

When did you start gardening? What drew you to it?

I started gardening years ago-both flowers and veggies. I have always loved being outdoors and in nature. I enjoy having flowers and trees around me.

What would you like to tell the club about yourself: other passion(s); work (current/former/volunteer); family; gardening credentials; etc.?

Since I enjoy being outdoors, I am often hiking, biking or kayaking. I love to travel especially to Maine, NH and Hawaii. My next big trip, if possible, will be to Scotland. I enjoy reading and my new hobby is photography.

I have been a registered nurse for almost 49 years. For the last 10 years I have been a Hospice nurse and found my true calling. I consider myself retired but before Covid-19 I worked a limited number of hours each month.

I live alone since my husband passed. We did not have children. I am close to my niece and her family who live in Atlanta. (Where the bicycle photo was taken.) I volunteer at Aurelia's Garden in Wayland and Medway- garden plots which were started by the former horticulturist at Elm Bank. Last year despite Covid the gardens produced tons of food for nearby food banks. The work is all done by volunteers.





club do that it isn't doing now?
The club is great the way it is!

How did you become involved with the Natick Garden Club?

During Natick Days I approached the NGC booth and received info. I joined a year later once I was able to reduce work hours.

What is most important to you about NGC membership?

I really enjoyed helping Elizabeth and Joanne with the club's trips. I appreciated learning with them. I enjoy the camaraderie and learning opportunities.

What would you like to see the



This is from a weekend trip to Savannah taken last month while I was staying with my niece in Atlanta.



Julie Mason

Member since 1998, with sabbaticals

What kind of gardening do you do? Or prefer?

I enjoy all types of gardening! However, because my yard is mostly Oak trees and ledge it has really limited what I can plant. As a result, I have learned to embrace shade and rock gardens. I also love the versatility of container gardening (annuals, herbs, and perennials). My latest passion is gardening to attract birds and butterflies. I was ecstatic when hummingbirds and finches became regulars in my yard!

When did you start gardening? What drew you to it?

I was first attracted to gardening when I was a little girl visiting my grandparents'

backyard. My grandparents came to the U.S. from Italy and took great pride in their vegetable and flower gardens. They even had a small grape arbor. My grandfather would make wine and my grandmother would make jelly from the grapes they grew. I have been hooked on gardening ever since! Working (or just being) in a garden always speaks to something inside of me. It just feels like home.

What would you like to tell the club about yourself: other passion(s); work (current/former/volunteer); family; gardening credentials; etc.?

My husband Mike and I have been married for 35 years and have two grown children (Chris 29 and Katie 26). We also have a Beagle named Lucy who loves gardening (mostly digging holes!) I am still adjusting to being an "empty nester" but enjoying all the extra time to play in the garden. When I am not playing in the dirt at home, I work as a Preschool teacher in Wayland. This is my 20th year teaching and has been so rewarding. I have learned so much from my "little people." One lesson learned: Whatever you do in life, do it with the confidence of a four year old in a Batman cape! Before I started teaching, I was a Flight Attendant for 15 years and still have a passion for travel.





How did you become involved with the Natick Garden Club?

I am a returning member of the Natick Garden Club. I first joined many years ago when the club was new. Now that my children are grown and time permits, I am thrilled to be a member again. Also joining me is my niece, Rose Coyman. We attended our first meeting together last year (unfortunately, that was the last meeting before Covid-19 hit). Looking forward to getting back together in person in 2021!

What is most important to you about NGC membership?

It was wonderful to see so many of the original members when I returned to the Club last year. Everyone at NGC is so warm, welcoming, and generous. Some of my most beloved perennials came from the gardens of other members. This quote is one of my favorites, "We might think we are

nurturing our gardens, but of course it's our gardens that really nurture us."

What would you like to see the club do that it isn't doing now?

It would be fun to have more meetings where members share their favorite garden things (plants, tools, ideas, tips, etc.) I also loved being able to tour other member's gardens and hope that is something that will return in the future. The NGC has blossomed in so many ways since the beginning and is a credit to all the hard work and dedication of so many wonderful longtime members. It's so nice to be back. P.S. Don't forget, if you're a gardener, you can always put "Plant Manager" on your resume!



Pam Harrington

Member since 2008

What kind of gardening do you do? Or prefer?

I love to experiment with new plants and garden styles. We have been at our home in South Natick for more than 20 years and I have re-landscaped its one-acre lot numerous times, usually to follow a popular trend of the time. I admit to being a bit of a plant collector, guilty of acquiring more plants than I have space for.

The property border I planted with native shrubs and small trees over ten years ago is now filled in taking care of itself. After finding snakes in my basement a few years ago, I removed all the foundation beds around the house and had a pea stone buffer zone and paver walkways installed in their place. I now have a large raised-bed vegetable garden out in the yard where I grow a variety of vegetables, herbs and flowers. I am presently working on installing pollinator-friendly perennial beds planted with native meadow plants around the yard and on refining a shade garden I have sited under a row of white pines. Over the years, I have transitioned to purely organic gardening methods.



When did you start gardening? What drew you to it?

I started gardening when I became a homeowner with a yard, mostly dabbling with small garden beds of summer flowers and vegetables. It was just fun to plant things and reap the rewards. The more I learned, the more I enjoyed it.

What would you like to tell the club about yourself: other passion(s); work (current/former/volunteer); family; gardening credentials; etc.?

Over the past 15 years, since I retired, horticulture and gardening has become the common theme to all my activities. Not really knowing much about gardening, I dove into it. I began taking courses in landscape design, preservation and history at what was then the Landscape Institute at Harvard/Arnold Arboretum, and was

hooked. We are fortunate to live in an area where there are so many opportunities to learn, garden and volunteer. The more I did, the more I found to do. I have been a MA Master Gardener since 2006, volunteered at Elm Bank, Garden in the Woods in Framingham and other sites in the area, and am a frequent visitor to botanic gardens. For a time, I had a 20 x 20-foot plot in a community garden in Ogunquit, Maine where I learned a tremendous amount about vegetable gardening from my plot neighbors.



Most recently, I have been pursuing a certificate in botanic art and illustration, a program offered at the Friends of Wellesley College Botanic Gardens.

I love to travel, and in recent years, there has been a horticulture, garden design or garden history theme to almost all of my trips. In fact, some of my best ever trips have been to the UK with my friends at NGC.

How did you become involved with the Natick Garden Club?

I joined the club in 2008 in order to meet fellow gardeners in town. I was welcomed immediately, met lots of people and thoroughly enjoyed the monthly meetings and activities from the start. The first NGC auction I attended was held in the lower-level parish hall of the then First Baptist Church in Natick Center. It was wild!

What is most important to you about NGC membership?

Gardening friends, camaraderie, and the meetings are what I enjoy most.

What would you like to see the club do that it isn't doing now?

It is difficult to suggest any new activities that the club is not already doing. It is a large club, there is always something going on, and the variety of activities is terrific. I am a big fan of the field trips and garden visits, the more the better.



Alison Parnes

Member since 2015

What kind of gardening do you do? Or prefer?

I am attracted to lots of different colors, more of a cottage style if anything. I imagine that this year, as usual, I will spend considerable time and money at garden shops where my eyes are always bigger than my small property. I also usually plant a few different varieties of tomatoes and some herbs. Luckily the woodchucks and squirrels are willing to share a few tomatoes with me each summer.

When did you start gardening? What drew you to it?

As a single mother, working full time, I had little time to devote to gardening, but always planted some vegetables.



What would you like to tell the club about yourself: other passion(s); work (current/former/volunteer); family; gardening credentials; etc.?

Back in "normal" times I volunteered at the Natick Food Pantry, working with clients and spent a bit of time volunteering at TCAN. Also, I had been exercising a lot and actually loving it. I was fortunate to be able to travel extensively around the world and hope to return to all that soon!

How did you become involved with the Natick Garden Club?

I have been a member of the Natick Garden Club for almost 5 years. I was encouraged to join by a neighbor, Avril Bacon, who is not a novice like I was and still am. I was getting ready to retire from a long career that I loved with CBS-TV, and wanted to get more involved with my community, meet new people and perhaps learn a thing or two.



What is most important to you about NGC membership?

The club has given me some great ideas. In addition to handling logo items for the club, I have enjoyed helping with club activities on the town common.



What would you like to see the club do that it isn't doing now?

Spring will be here soon and hopefully our ability to stay well and have in person meetings again will also be here soon!



Lucy Morris

Member since 2014

When did you start gardening? What drew you to it?

Ever since moving to a house in Natick with a substantial garden, I have been interested in improving my gardening skills which were negligible. It's been a gradual process. Thanks to the NGC it's been an enjoyable one.

How did you become involved with the Natick Garden Club?

I heard about the club from Sue Mandell, a fellow teacher and neighbor, and Sue's garden has inspired me to work on mine.



What is most important to you about NGC membership?

As a member I have enjoyed participating in downtown plantings and the annual dinner planning committee. My favorite in person and Zoom meetings include the hands-on meetings and seeing new and old friends.





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