

THE FIRST LADY OF THE GARDEN CLUB ~~~

MADAME PRESIDENT, Carolyn Willard

Interview by Linda Cornell
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I sat down with Carolyn recently to uncover a little more "dirt" on who she is and what makes her such a perfect match for the job of GCBB president.

Carolyn came to the club in 2008 through Betsy McBratney and Timmy Shapiro, two of our very auspicious members. They were neighbors and all shared a great love of gardening; so the introduction to the GCBB was a natural for her. Her Mom gardened when Carolyn was growing up, and she remembers Mom finding solace and peace working in the soil. That intimacy with garden work became a pivotal touchstone for Carolyn as she moved through her various homes and her own gardens. It also explains her answer when I asked what her favorite plants were. If she had to choose, she said "perennials," but with a caveat: they have to have an "emotional connection." Then she continued to explain that most of her garden plants have come from friends, historical places or have been moved from different gardens in her life. She walks among her plantings and has that heart-centered remembrance of people she has known and places she has been.

Peace and solace, just like her Mom. Carolyn also confessed that she cannot throw anything away which makes her gardens a "collection" rather than one with a formal design.

Carolyn has had a few careers in her past, most notably as the city editor of the Lowell Sun. What also struck me was a later career teaching preschool for sixteen years. I, tongue in cheek, think that has helped her to rally all the GCBB members into a small community of happy women (without the cookies and milk!)

This prompted my question to her, "What unique quality do you feel you bring to your presidency?". Carolyn's response in true modest fashion came with some hesitation. When I pushed her, she said her "organizational skills - the ability to see the forest from the trees and direct honesty." Another goal, "keeping the members well informed," ultimately keeps us all involved, and is key to her approach. She loves nothing more than to keep the enthusiasm up so that all members want to participate and take responsibility in making their club an important part of their lives. Carolyn recognizes and values each of the member's abilities and allows individuals to choose their own level of participation without guilt. She is the kind of leader you want to work for. Her love of toiling in the greenhouse, that we as GCBB members are more than fortunate to have, is the key to our club's "close involvement" with one another. It is the "culture of our

club."

Her home life with husband Winn is a gentle one. On weekends Winn likes to be outside puttering, juxtaposed to a desk job all week. Both Winn and Carolyn love to be on the water. They have recently purchased a 36' Manatee which they keep in Florida. This allows them to motor around the west coast islands and enjoy time away.

The home gardens that Carolyn tends are mainly shade gardens. She has created a "fern bed" from ferns she collected from various places. She enjoys having mixed containers around to throw spots of color into the shady locations. We discussed aging and gardening and wondered why we both like to think about making new gardens when we can barely tend to what we already have. It's in the blood of all GCBB members, we agreed. But Carolyn has now started planting shrubs so they maintain themselves more easily and with this she has extra time to pursue her other interests which include quilting, cooking, reading and watercolor painting. Carolyn started taking painting lessons three years ago which she likens it to gardening in a way. Her description is poetic. Painting is " something you can immerse yourself in and forget the other preoccupations life inevitably brings."

The one story that Carolyn told me which I think speaks to her love of gardening is that on the day they signed papers for their new house she went into the yard and started pulling out bittersweet which was running wild throughout the back yard. It was just a story until she mentioned that she was still in her dress! Only a gardener would confess to that.