

# 'I found my people here'

**Seth Chitwood** The Standard-Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

Tucked behind the historic Rotch-Jones-Duff House, inside the old greenhouse is a group of nature-loving women who work diligently like worker bees to grow flowers and plants for their annual sale. • Approaching 100 years, the Buzzards Bay Garden Club has over 70 members that are all enthusiastic about bringing the power of nature and horticulture to the South Coast community. • "We have this great relationship with the RJD," says Barbara Brown, club president. "We've been using the greenhouse for many years now, and it's really become the heart of our club." • The annual sale on May 3, open to the public from 9 am to 1 pm, is one of the most anticipated horticultural events in New Bedford. It's part fundraiser, part community celebration, according to Brown.



This year, after months of propagation, pruning, and collective effort, the club will offer over 3,000 plants, from heirloom geraniums to fanciful succulents, shade-loving coleus to robust tomato starts, and even specialty items such as scented geraniums and herb baskets.

"We start growing in the greenhouse in the fall around October," said Teresa Beattie, co-chair of the greenhouse and plant sale committee. "We begin propagating plants and growing from seeds... It's a cycle of care that lasts all winter."

**Taking over the greenhouse with their plants**

Originally part of the RJD estate, the structure was mostly abandoned until the garden club took it over in the 1980s, transforming it from a near ruin into a horticultural hub.

"The club installed this new insulated roof, raised funds for a major renovation during COVID, and made it much more functional," Brown said. "It's our oasis, especially in winter when it's freezing outside. You come in here and it's just warm and beautiful."

Much of what flourishes in the greenhouse starts with the club's own members. After each summer, gardeners bring in cuttings and donations from their private gardens.

"All these plants have started from little stems, some passed along year after year," said Beattie. "Some geraniums may have been bought at last year's sale, grown at home for a season, then brought back for propagation. There's this lovely sense of continuity."

Others specialize in the club's famous succulent arrangements. "Our member Leslie Burner is the queen of succulents," Thersea added.

"She starts them, and before the sale, we gather up all kinds of pots donated by members and friends. Every little arrangement has a story. Some of the tiny ones are just so adorable, you almost don't want to part with them."

According to Brown, the group comes in every day, even during the winter, to water, check for bugs and turn the plant trays.

"Plants need such constant care, especially in a New England greenhouse where ventilation is always a challenge," said Beattie. "It's made a lot easier because everyone's so committed. You can't do this alone."

Rick Finneran, the lead gardener and facilities manager, has worked at the RJD for nine years and has collaborated with the club on many different projects.

"Their sale is really beneficial to not only us, but just the overall community. It's nice to have it set right here in downtown New Bedford," he said. "We couldn't be happier."

### **Beyond the greenhouse, the garden club educates the community**

The club's impact extends well beyond just their greenhouse walls. Funds raised from the sale provide grants for community education, city gardening projects, and local schools.

"It's all about spreading the love of gardening and ecology," Brown said. "We donate plants to schools to help children learn about growing their own food. We work with organizations on environmental projects, partner with Friends of Hazelwood Park, and support teaching initiatives all over our region. It's meaningful work."

There's a long tradition here, too: the club traces its roots back nearly 100

years, and generations of local families have played a part. "We have members whose mothers and grandmothers planted these very gardens, or started the boxwood hedges at the old Nonquitt greenhouse 60 years ago," added Brown.

Many members also say that they find a renewed sense of purpose and connection in the work after volunteering for a few weeks.

"I found my people here," Beattie said. "We moved a lot while our kids were growing up, and settling here on the SouthCoast, I needed a community. Someone invited me to water on a Tuesday, and that was it... I had found my tribe."

"I love the plants and the camaraderie," added Barbara. "You come in, see what everyone's accomplished, and it's just incredible. No one does this for recognition. It's about giving back, sharing what we know, and making New Bedford more beautiful and connected in the process."

As the tent for the sale goes up and the tables fill with hundreds of vibrant plants, anticipation builds.

"Come early to get the best of the bunch. But more than anything, come meet us, learn a little, and enjoy the oasis we've built together," Brown added.

The Buzzards Bay Garden Club Annual Plant Sale will be held Saturday, May 3, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., at the Rotch-Jones-Duff House & Garden Museum, 396 County St., New Bedford.

*Standard-Times staff writer Seth Chitwood can be reached at [schitwood@s-t.com](mailto:schitwood@s-t.com). Follow him on twitter: @ChitwoodReports. Support local journalism by purchasing a digital or print subscription to The Standard-Times today.*

