



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE

LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

By John Paul Deley, Vice President,
Detre Library & Archives

Green Thumb Pittsburgh: Resources For Studying Area Gardens

On a steep hill behind a row of burnt umber-colored brick houses just off Braddock Avenue in Swissvale was my grandmother's garden. It was part of a meticulously maintained series of terraced garden allotments tended by neighbors: Slovaks, Germans, and Italians. Now it is an overgrown woodlot, but I remember neatly tended rows of beans and cabbage, tomato and parsley, lettuce and peppers. Here steel mill working families supplemented meager salaries with juicy strawberries in June, perfect peaches in July, and perfumed pears in August. There were profusions of lilac and creeping phlox in the spring and dinner plate size dahlias and golden chrysanthemums in the fall.

Noted Roman sage Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote, "if you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need," and the Detre Library & Archives is a phenomenal place to achieve a better understanding of Pittsburghers and their gardens. Its resources illuminate how residents have interacted with their environment, provided sustenance for their tables, added to the beauty of their homes and public spaces, and joined their hearts to nature in order to feed their souls.

Numerous early diaries and journals recount the lessons learned by generations of



**Andrew Bianco next to a
pear tree.**

HHC Detre L&A, 1994.0283.

Pittsburgh area residents who scratched the altered urban soil, planted a few seeds, and enjoyed a bountiful harvest. One example is the *Journal of Ebenezer Denny* which, in 1788, referred to gardens at Fort Pitt where there were, "fruit trees ... and parsnips in considerable abundance."¹ Early nineteenth-century almanacs published in Pittsburgh noted that "...the health and comfort of a family is increased, where the fruits and

vegetables of the garden are daily enjoyed."²

First person accounts of cultural traditions associated with gardens can be found in the Italian American oral history interviews of Marco Mastrangelo³, Antonio Cicco⁴, Stella Garufi⁵, and Andrew Bianco which includes garden photographs.⁶ Landscaping companies are represented in oral histories with the principals of J. Esposito and Sons Landscaping⁷ and Cardillo Landscaping.⁸



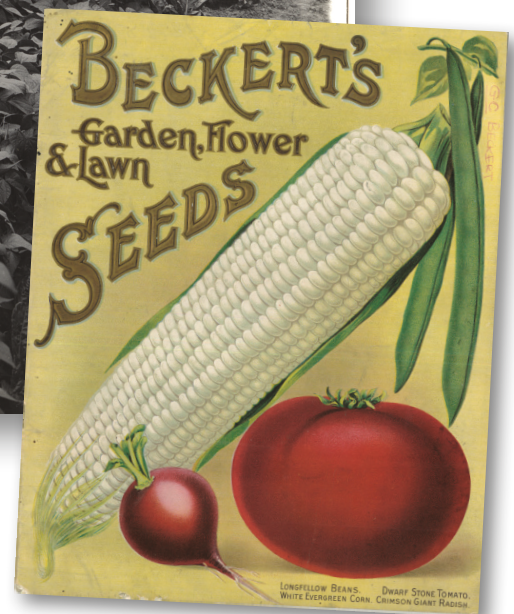
**Beckert's Catalog,
front cover, 1905.**

HHC Detre L&A, MFF 2756.



Beechwood School students working in the garden, 1916.

HHC Detre L&A, Pittsburgh Public School Photographs, MSP 117, B022.F03.



Beckert's Catalog, back cover, 1905.

HHC Detre L&A, MFF 2756.

Large public institutional gardens are highlighted in the Kennywood Park Records, which has photographs of ornamental landscaping and memorial gardens.⁹ The Pittsburgh Public School Records and Photographs¹⁰ documents the home and garden program and how it became a regular part of the elementary science curriculum in the mid-1920s. Students learned to adapt a garden site, plan a garden, grow plants from seeds, maintain and harvest a crop, and properly store vegetables.^{11,12} The Postcard Collection contains views of the Victory Garden at Duquesne¹³ and the Formal Gardens at Dixmont¹⁴ among others while the Charlotte Cohen Papers¹⁵ has photographs of Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens and the Mellon Park garden.

Newly acquired collections include two boxes of records from the Pittsburgh Rose Society,¹⁶ which was organized on May 24, 1949 through the efforts of the Pittsburgh Garden Center (at Mellon Park) and the American Rose Society, District 3. Their 1st Annual Rose Show was held in June 1950 and was open to all amateur rose growers. The show was held at the Garden Center for many years and later at Phipps Conservatory and other locations around Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Rose Society in alliance with the Garden Club of McKeesport helps maintain the Renziehausen Park Rose Garden, the second largest rose garden in the state with 2,000 roses. This cooperative venture began in 1993.

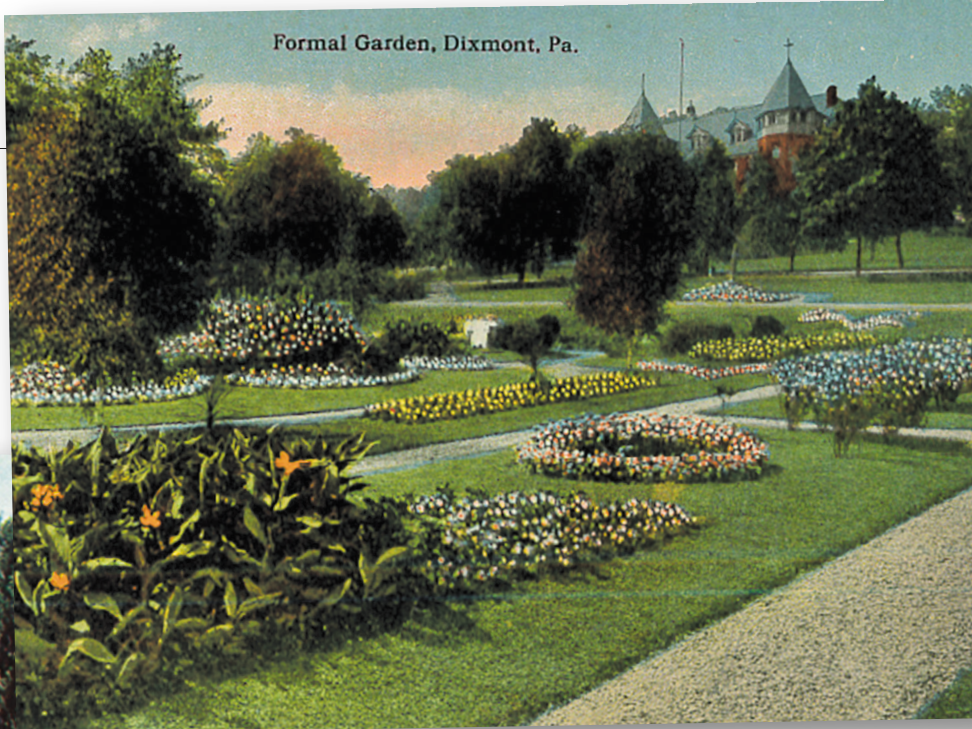
One and a half boxes of materials from the Stanton Heights Garden Club¹⁷ (founded

in 1950) document both a social club dedicated to the planting and care of gardens and plants and a charitable and philanthropic organization. Guest speakers at their meetings frequently covered a variety of topics such as flowering shrubs and trees, centerpieces, common poisonous plants, famous gardens and, of course, gardening tips.

Four boxes of materials from the Linden Garden Club,¹⁸ founded in 1924 for women who lived near Linden Avenue in Pittsburgh, contain reports from their president, committee, and treasurer, meeting agendas, programs for annual meetings, presentation

Duquesne University Victory Garden.

HHC Detre L&A, GPC Box 5.



Formal Garden, Dixmont, Pa.


Formal garden at Dixmont.

HHC Detre L&A, GPC Box 13.

ideas, flyers, meeting minutes, garden market program, and photographs documenting how the club collaborated with other garden clubs to hold garden and flower shows, including an annual spring garden show in Pittsburgh, initially called the Garden Market, but later called May Market.

Published reference sources abound, including, but not limited to: the 1839 American Flower Garden Directory¹⁹; the 1905 manuscript of Beckert's Garden, flower and lawn seeds catalog (published in Allegheny, Pa.)²⁰; the 1948 Garden Club Federation of Pittsburgh's highways and byways for Western Pennsylvania gardeners²¹; the 1985 Pittsburgh Home and Garden Show exhibition²²; the 1989 Biblical Garden at Rodef Shalom²³; and the Knox Fruit Farm and Nurseries from the

R. Cummings & Co. on Smithfield Street in 1872.²⁴ All these treasures portray the diversity of materials that honor Pittsburgh's green thumb(s).

Whether you are planning a new horticultural experiment, rejuvenating a weedy backyard, or launching into an organic adventure of self-sufficiency, the Detre Library & Archives collections provide contextual insight, document the experience of our gardening forbearers, and inspire future generations of horticultural enthusiasts. 

¹ HHC Detre L&A, Denny-O'Hara Family Papers, MSS 51, <https://historicalpittsburgh.org/islandora/object/pitt:31735070942804>.

² HHC Detre L&A, Loomis's Pittsburgh Almanac / calculated by Sanford C. Hill, F148.8.L863.

³ HHC Detre L&A, 1995.0039, March 26, 1994.

⁴ HHC Detre L&A, 1999.0073, January 10, 1997.

⁵ HHC Detre L&A, 1999.0069, March 22, 1995.

⁶ HHC Detre L&A, 1995.0341, August 11, 1994; photographs 1994.0283.

⁷ HHC Detre L&A, 2016.0102.

⁸ HHC Detre L&A, 1995.0041.

⁹ HHC Detre L&A, MSS 141.

¹⁰ HHC Detre L&A, MSP 117, https://historicalpittsburgh.org/islandora/object/pitt:US-QQS-MSP117/from_search/bf01c213380c94a5f59d14bff18b99b0-7.

¹¹ HHC Detre L&A, Pittsburgh Public School Photographs, MSP 117, B008.F03.106, Holmes Public School Students Gardening.

¹² HHC Detre L&A, Pittsburgh Public School Photographs, MSP 117, B022.F03.102, Beechwood Elementary School Gardens.

¹³ HHC Detre L&A, General Postcard Collection, Box 5.

¹⁴ HHC Detre L&A, General Postcard Collection, Box 13.

¹⁵ HHC Detre L&A, Charlotte Cohen Papers, 2015.0071.

¹⁶ HHC Detre L&A, 2018.0153.

¹⁷ HHC Detre L&A, 2017.0131.

¹⁸ HHC Detre L&A, MSS 805.

¹⁹ HHC Detre L&A, SB405.B75.

²⁰ HHC Detre L&A, MFF 2756.

²¹ HHC Detre L&A, SB439.P412 G218 d.

²² HHC Detre L&A, GPC B001 F013.

²³ HHC Detre L&A, SB59.P692 R687 1989 q.

²⁴ HHC Detre L&A, SB113 K6 1872.