



Our History

THE BEGINNING

Excerpts from the *History of RIWPS, 1987-1997* by Mary E. Finger

Sometime in the early spring of 1986 a congenial group gathered in the cook house at the Audubon Eppley Refuge for a workshop in wild-plant gardening offered by Lisa Gould and Doris Anthony. Those present that day were Marnie Lacouture, Nancy Magendantz, Martha Marshall, Betty Salomon, and Johnny Stone. In the course of the day's conversation Lisa described the wildflower garden club to which her mother belonged in North Carolina. Her mother's group, she explained, had three primary areas of interest: growing wild plants, working toward their conservation, and going on walks and trips to see natives in their native habitats. The Eppley group began to talk about starting a wild plant organization in Rhode Island. Several ideas emerged.

They did not want another garden club, a Rhode Island wild plant group should have a strong conservation component. It should have a broad enough base to interest many people, ranging from highly qualified professionals to those who simply liked to walk in the woods and fields and it should be fun for its members. Although Irene Stuckey and Millie House were not at the workshop, they encouraged and supported the forming group. The New England Wild flower Society also responded with interest, and a native plant sale sponsored by Betty Salomon's generated even more enthusiasm. The seed had been planted and the ground was fertile," Lisa Gould said, "people were ready for it."

■ MARCH 1987 TO MARCH 1990

Presidents: Lisa Gould 1987-1989, Gilbert George 1989-1990

The first business meeting of the Rhode Wild Plant Society (RIWPS) took place on March 14, 1987. About sixty people gathered at the Neighborhood Guild in Peace Dale, and the atmosphere was "almost euphoric," according to Kathy Barton. It was "like coming home," she said to find other people who cared as much about wild plants as she did. Betty Salomon presided and offered a slate of officers, which was approved as presented. Lisa Gould, the newly elected president, gave a brief progress report, noting that the society was in the process of becoming incorporated and that by-laws were being prepared. Irene Stuckey was named the Honorary President. The program was a slide talk on "Rare and Endangered Plants of Rhode Island," presented by Rick Enser of the Rhode Island Natural Heritage Program.

The Articles of Incorporation, which were filed three days after the meeting, recognizing RIWPS as "a non-profit corporation, organized exclusively for charitable and educational purposes and more specifically to promote the preservation of wild plants and their habitats (with particular emphasis on native plants) through education, research and related activities; to cooperate with other organizations with similar goals; and to provide counsel to governmental and civic bodies." The young society was clearly on its way. It exhibited a sureness of purpose from the beginning, and it is interesting to note that the elements which have constituted its strengths over the first ten years were pretty much in place at the outset. Committees were assembled and they set to work covering Education, Legislation, Preservation and Protection, Programs, Propagation, and Publicity.

The early newsletters and minutes continue to convey a sense of eagerness and camaraderie as the group embarked on various paths to achieve their primary goals of preservation, propagation, and education. The first Newsletter, Fall/Winter '87-88, appeared on two sides of a single sheet of tan paper, enlivened by a line drawing of Bluets (*Houstonia caerulea*) on the front and of Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) on the back. Lisa Gould served as Editor and would continue in that capacity until 1995.

The Newsletter reported "that membership had already grown to more than 150 and stated that they received many requests for information about wild plant gardening, and for speakers to civic groups. We are being asked to conduct botanical surveys, lead walks, and coordinate inland preservation." Members were encouraged to "consolidate this interest into action." Those hesitant were assured that "it doesn't matter if you don't know a dandelion from a lady slipper, or can't speak fluent Latin, we need your participation!"

A brief article by Lisa Gould answered the question "Why Go Native?" Gilbert George supplied a list of invasive plants to avoid. There was information about getting wild-flower seeds from the New England Wild Flower Society, and a request for drawings for a logo, with a prize offered for the one selected. The Jack-in-the-Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*) logo first appeared on the September 1988 Newsletter. This familiar plant, a favorite with many people, was suggested by Betty Salomon; the artwork was created by Gil George, and the final logo designed by Russell Kolton of URI.

Four general membership meetings a year were scheduled, for the second Saturdays in September, November, January and March, these dates chosen to avoid times when members would want to be out in the woods, fields or their gardens. The meetings were free and open to the public, and held in various parts of the state. They began with a social hour, arranged by the Hospitality Committee, chaired at first by Edith Calderara and then for many years by Phyllis Johnson. Good food facilitated good conversation. Then a brief business meeting was followed by a speaker, sometimes a RIWPS member, sometimes from outside the group, but always knowledgeable in a matter of interest to wild-plant people. Other activities included several walks a month. In all but the most severe weather RIWPS members moved about the state from the monastery in Cumberland to the rushes and sedges of South Kingstown and from the Norman Bird Sanctuary to Beach Pond to see and learn about native plants. Early volunteer leaders included Kathy Barton, Rick Enser, Gilbert George, Lisa Gould, and Irene Stuckey. There were also occasional propagation and craft workshops, identification sessions, and garden tours. When a mushroom walk in the fall of 1988 attracted over sixty people, most of them eager to collect edible mushrooms, the RIWPS Board voted to establish a policy of no-collecting on RIWPS walks. Walk leaders could make exceptions in rare cases. Abiding by this policy, the Newsletter explained, would

insure that all participants could see the plant being discussed, and more importantly, it was felt to be in harmony with the RIWPS philosophy of preserving and protecting our native plants.

In the spring of 1988 the RIWPS office was established at the Audubon Society of Rhode Island's headquarters in Smithfield, through the generosity of Audubon and its Executive Director, Alfred Hawkes. There, with a desk, a phone, a file cabinet and a vintage typewriter, office coordinator Martha Marshall, and later Helen Lusi, kept things in order. They and other office volunteers answered the phone and responded to messages on the machine, as well as processed the paper work for walk and program registrations the annual membership renewals and the many mailings to members and other groups. They also fielded questions such as: What kind of plants can I use in my yard to attract birds? Is there a directory of U.S. botanical societies? Please send me a list of poisonous plants you could come across in Rhode Island.

By April 1989 the Newsletter had assumed its now familiar appearance: multi-paged, printed on heavy white stock with the logo next to the masthead. A pattern of presenting both scholarly and general-interest articles was established. Over the ten-year period Newsletter articles would range from "Identification of Marine Macroscopic Algae" to "Rhode Island's Butterflies and Their Native Host Plants," and from "Reflections Along Botanical Trails in Rhode Island," to "Weird and Wonderful Waterlilies." The articles were followed by news of the society, reports of committee activities, news from other environmental groups, and a variety of items of interest to wild-plant people. Mailed with the Newsletter was a Calendar of Events with notices of walks and meetings and a sheet of Cultivation Notes about a particular wild plant.

The March 1988 Newsletter announced a plant sale in June and expressed the hope that "it would be the start of a fine annual tradition!" That sale, which realized a profit of \$1300 ("successful beyond our wildest dreams," Betsy Keiffer reported in the September Newsletter) was indeed the start of a tradition which has continued with ever-increasing success over RIWPS' history.

Proceeds from the Plant Sale initially went to the Conservation Education Fund, administered by the Education Committee, with Helen Lusi and Janet White as co-chairs. During this period the Fund made it possible for elementary school children to participate in Audubon programs and to enjoy field trips to URI's Alton Jones Campus. Conservation Education funds also purchased enough Nina Williams' "Wildflowers of Rhode Island" posters to send one to each elementary school in the state.

As well as supporting the Conservation Education Fund, the Plant Sales have furthered RIWPS' goal of fostering the cultivation of native plants. "Native plants were not available locally before the RIWPS sales; people used to have to go to great lengths to find them," says Carolyn Curtis, RIWPS member and proprietor of Friendship Gardens. "The sales filled a real need." Helpful information about plants and their cultivation has always been available from RIWPS members who work at the sales. RIWPS plant sales also offer the assurance that the plants have not been dug in the wild. Until 1991, plants at RIWPS' sales came from members' gardens, were propagated by individual members, or were from the stock of environmentally-responsible nurseries. Since 1991 the Seed Starters group has augmented these sources with substantial contributions to the sales.

One of RIWPS' earliest projects, under the leadership of Legislative Committee chair Edith Calderara, was attempting to get Sea Lavender (*Limonium carolinianum*) brought under the protection of the already-existing "Christmas Greens" law. This attractive salt-marsh plant is highly valued for floral arrangements. For several summers RIWPS members had seen vans, station wagons and other vehicles carrying Sea Lavender away from the marshes. The plants were often pulled up by their roots and taken before they had set seed. With this observed rate of collection and the added pressure of habitat loss from shoreline development. Sea Lavender might be on its way to becoming a rare plant. Bolstered by research and testimony from Irene Stuckey, Representative (and RIWPS member) Leona Kelley introduced into the 1989 legislature a bill forbidding the gathering of Sea Lavender. It passed the House with no difficulty, but was lost in the turmoil of a difficult session and deemed not important enough to consider in the Senate. Undaunted, Representative Kelley introduced the bill again in 1990 and it would finally be signed into law in 1991, joining other species similarly protected by the "Christmas

The early years were active ones for plant inventories. At least seventeen areas were surveyed in 1989 alone, for example. Gilbert George, Lisa Gould, and others contributed their extensive knowledge of wild plants and a great deal of time to conducting inventories.

Many activities begun during this period have continued to be important elements in the RIWPS program. The first Wild Plant Week was conducted by the Education Committee in late April of 1988 and featured walks and workshops. Wild Plant Week, established from the beginning by an official proclamation of the governor and dedicated to making Rhode Island aware of the importance of native plants, continues to be celebrated every spring.

RIWPS has participated in the state Science Fair every year since 1988, sending two judges and providing awards in the junior and senior divisions for plant-related projects. In another early project the Education Committee produced a large wildflower display board, which used pictures from Irene Stuckey's book, *Rhode Island Wildflowers*, and lighted up when a proper identification was made.

In 1989 RIWPS took over the sponsorship of a Plant Identification course taught by Lisa Gould and previously offered by the Alton Jones Campus of URI. It has become a staple of the RIWPS program and was repeated in 1991, 1993, 1995, and 1996. It meets in June at the Nettle Marie Jones Nature Preserve in West Greenwich and uses both classroom and field experience for an intensive week-long study of wild flowers, ferns, shrubs, and trees. Since 1993 the final day of the course has taken place in August and examines coastal plants and their habitats.

During the years between 1987 and 1990 the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society had grown to a membership of 330, had firmly established itself, and had found its niche among the state's organizations.

■ MARCH 1990 TO MARCH 1993

Presidents: Martha Marshall, 1990-1991, Kathleen Barton, 1991-1993

Probably the most significant events for RIWPS between 1990 and 1993 were the celebration of the Filth Anniversary, the preparation of the Plant Discovery Boxes and the beginning of the Seed Starters group. On March 14, 1992, about 150 people gathered at mid-day at the Roger Williams Park Casino for RIWPS Fifth Anniversary. "It was the largest

gathering of RIWPS members to date, and the atmosphere was celebratory," remembers Joan Pilson, chair of the Fifth Anniversary Committee. The event began with a social hour downstairs in the Casino, where Martha Marshall had arranged an extensive exhibit of photographs taken by RIWPS members of people and plants over the five-year period. The party then moved upstairs to enjoy a buffet luncheon at tables attractively arranged with dark green tablecloths and cheerful spring centerpieces.

President Kathy Barton presided at the event, and Founders Awards, framed wildflower photographs by Irene Stuckey, were presented to Lisa Gould and Betty Salomon for their roles in getting the Society started. Leona Kelley received a Community Service Award in recognition of her work in protecting Sea Lavender. The day ended with a talk on "New England's Rare, Threatened and Endangered Plants," by Dr. Garrett Crow, Professor of Plant Biology at the University of New Hampshire. An interesting footnote is that dues were paid promptly that year as the event was free to members in good standing. About six months earlier Dorothy Swift had called a meeting for people interested in propagating plants from seed. A small but enthusiastic group responded. Soon they began gathering at the Lane View Nursery in Portsmouth, usually two mornings a month, to experience the satisfaction and excitement of making plants grow. They called themselves the Seed Starters. They collected seeds from their own properties and gardens, and occasionally ordered them from the New England Wild Flower Society. Their purpose was threefold: to learn how to propagate plants, to produce some for themselves and to provide some for the RIWPS plant sales. "We had some astonishment at the early work days that the seeds were actually germinating and growing!" Dorothy Swift reports in the March 1992 Newsletter. Indeed they were growing, and the Seed Starters were soon supplying hundreds of plants each year for RIWPS plant sales.

After the passage of the Sea Lavender legislation in May of 1991, RIWPS set out to educate the public about the law and to seek cooperation in enforcing it. "Sea Lavender: A Protected Plant in Rhode Island," an attractive and appropriately lavender-colored pamphlet was prepared and distributed. It featured a photograph by Irene Stuckey and the text was adapted from an article she had written several years earlier. Roberta Furgalack supplied a drawing of Sea Lavender in bloom, with enlargements of the flower and calyx. As well as describing the plant and explaining the provisions of the law, the pamphlet suggests using German Statice (*Limonium latifolium*) as a substitute.

The Education Committee, with Betty Allen as chair, was, as always, busy during this period. They continued to sponsor pro-grains for elementary school groups and established an Educational Grants Fund to offer \$500 awards to college students pursuing careers in the area of wild plants and their habitats (see Appendix II). They introduced a "Fun Page" to be included in each Newsletter for "the younger members of RIWPS and the young in heart." Two library displays, "Rhode Island Orchids" and "What's Your Plant LQ.?" were prepared and made available to any library which requested them. The ever-popular "buzzer board," the wildflower identification board, continued to be borrowed and used and taken to fairs and meetings.

But the most ambitious undertaking of the Education Committee during this time was the preparation of Plant Discovery Boxes. The boxes were designed to help children in grades 4 through 6 learn about the plant world, with the hope that they would foster a lifelong interest in plants. Each contained posters, illustrated reference books, teacher guides and activity sheets, a plant identification board, tree cross-sections, hand lenses, and two slide

programs. The Plant Discovery Boxes could be borrowed free of charge for a two-week period and were available at five or six locations throughout the state. They have continued to be used each year and are particularly in demand in the springtime.

The upsurge in the number of people, both locally and nationally, who were incorporating native plants into their gardens and yards, brought a problem along with its benefits. As the number of wild plant gardeners grew, so did the number of dealers in wild plants, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to know which plants had been propagated from seed and which had been stolen from the wild. Irresponsible collecting in other parts of the country had severely depleted several popular species. The RIWPS Board found phrases such as "field grown" or "nursery grown" too vague to guarantee that plants were propagated by the nursery. The problem was especially difficult with mail order sources. Because of this, the RIWPS Board, in February 1991, adopted a policy statement on the purchase of native plants, no longer recommending any mail-order sources for native plants and urging caution in buying from local nurseries and garden centers.

In 1992 when the opportunity presented itself to sell plants at the GreenShare Garden and Environmental Field Day at the University of Rhode Island, RIWPS' September General Meeting was discontinued. Instead the Society took advantage of another chance to make native plants available to gardeners beyond its own membership, distribute literature, and sell posters. RIWPS has participated in the event each year since.

As in the past, the Program Committee continued to present a variety of walks and meetings, along with some additions. In the spring of 1990 a group from RIWPS traveled to Gatlinburg, Tennessee to attend the Annual Wildflower Pilgrimage there. "Rare Day," a day for talks, workshops, luncheon and walks, was celebrated in late May four times between 1990 and 1993, three of these at the Alton Jones Campus of URI and one at Blithewold in Bristol. 1991 marked the beginning of RIWPS' participation in CoastWeeks sponsored by the Coastal Resources Management 1 Council. That year, and each year since, a number of coastal walks have been scheduled during the period set aside in the fall to celebrate the nation's coastal resources. 1991 also saw the beginning of the winter slide shows, when RIWPS members gathered in the Audubon Auditorium on cold Saturday afternoons to enjoy one another's slides and warm refreshments. Many of these changes were initiated by Program Chair Joan Pilson. During this period the RIWPS office was managed principally by Marion Helwig, with Ethel Halsey taking over in 1992. The membership list was stable at about 355.

■ MARCH 1993 TO MARCH 1997

Presidents: Joan Pilson, 1993-1995, Joan Pilson & Richard Hull, 1995-1996, Richard Hull & Cindy Hempstead, 1996-1997

It is remarkable to note that until 1994 all the work of the society was done by volunteers: leading walks and workshops, presenting lectures, conducting inventories, propagating plants providing educational material, getting out Newsletters and other publications, cooperating with other environmental groups. And running the office. For example, over RIWPS' ten-year history hard-working program committee committees (chaired by Dorothy Swift. Joan Pilson, Mary Finger, Arlene Alviti, and Anne Wagner) have offered 277 walks and many lectures and workshops for a grand total of over 500 events, averaging almost one per week for each year.

Since 1987 there have been 20 Newsletters, adding up to a total of 160 pages (the majority produced by Lisa Gould), as well as many other publications, and RIWPS has conducted more than 100 inventories for townships and conservation organizations. Almost all this was accomplished with no fund-raising effort beyond plant sales and one annual membership notice. However, the growth of the society in recent years began to be attended by more work than could be handled by volunteers particularly in the office. This led the Board to search for a part-time Administrative Coordinator.

In the late spring of 1994 Patricia Vecchio, who came with impressive qualifications, was appointed to the post and took over supervision of the office volunteers, as well as other responsibilities. When, the following year, she found it too difficult to balance the demands of the job with those of her young children, Charlotte Spang assumed the position. She also was highly qualified, and in a few months was lured away to a full-time position. The pattern repeated itself with the next Administrative Coordinator. Morgan Hardwick-Witman, who left in less than a year also to accept a full-time position. For a fourth time RIWPS found Deborah Poor, another talented Administrative Coordinator.

Changes in office personnel had been preceded by another significant event: the acquisition of a computer in 1993. This made it possible to centralize information such as membership lists, book keeping, program scheduling, and the Newsletter, which were previously computerized on individual members' home systems. Much of the conversion was done by Kenneth and Mary Lou Upham, volunteer computer whizzes and Nancy Magendantz, who had maintained the membership data base for many years. Computer, printer, and software were purchased with RIWPS'S first grant, \$5000 from the Champlin Foundations.

Another development for RIWPS during this period was participation in the first four Rhode Island Spring Flower and Garden Shows. In fact, RIWPS not only participated but received acclaim in all of the shows, much to the credit of Judith Ireland, the imaginative designer of RIWPS' entries. She has been assisted by Irene Beauregard, Gilbert Moore, Joan Pilson, and Brian O'Connor, key workers in all four shows, as well as teams of RIWPS members and friends who brought the designs into being by propagating, purchasing, and forcing plants and trees, nursing them in greenhouses all over New England in order to have them in perfect condition in February instead of May, and finally planting them in the demonstration garden.

In 1994 "Bridge to Discovery: A Woodland Trail at the Nettie Jones Nature Preserve" received the Exhibitors' Choice Award as the best of the twenty-Seven demonstration gardens. Visitors to the show seemed to welcome RIWPS' quiet woodland as a change from the formal garden exhibits. A more rugged landscape was portrayed in 1995, and "Discover Ell Pond," was among the top five choices for both the Exhibitors' Choice and the People's Choice. In 1996 rather than replicating a natural area, the committee chose to create a home landscape. Featuring native plants, shrubs and trees, a play house and a grapevine arbor, it won the People's Choice Award. In 1997 RIWPS was selected to occupy a key position, the entrance garden of birch trees, native azaleas, wild flowers, ferns, and chokeberry, which ushered visitors into the show. The Society also planted two seating areas with native plants, especially violets, in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the year that Rhode Island school children chose the violet as the state flower.

Fund raising was stepped up during this period. In addition to the grant for the computer from the Champlin Foundations,

RIWPS received support from the Rhode Island Foundation in 1994 to pay a large part of the first-year salary of the new Administrative Coordinator. However, because of the Foundation's change in policy the following year, RIWPS was unable to receive further grants for this purpose. To counteract this a number of money raising activities were launched. An annual Holiday Appeal was instituted. Fund Raisers were held at Tranquil Lake Nursery in 1995 and 1996, with the nursery donating ten percent of the sales on the benefit day to RIWPS. A silent auction, an innovation at the June Plant Sale, brought in additional funds. RIWPS began to make an effort to sell plants at as many gatherings as possible, as well as T-shirts, aprons, tote bags, and posters. The sale of books has also proved to be a good way to raise money.

In other areas some of RIWPS' basic activities broadened in scope. Recently during Wild Plant Week RIWPS has placed a wild plant in as many libraries in the state as possible, emulating a longtime practice of Kay Kinsey. For many years she had been taking a wild flower in a small container to the East Greenwich Library with a sign which asked "DO you know what plant this is? See back for the answer." On the back was a short paragraph about the plant. The Education Committee recruited RIWPS volunteers to find and pot spring plants, take them to libraries and retrieve them at the end of the week. Brochures about RIWPS were left with the plants, and later there were wildflower bookmarks for libraries to distribute in other projects the Education Committee, chaired in recent years by Ethel Halsey, has conducted a number of workshops for classroom teachers. Four new displays were made available for libraries to borrow: "Wild Plants in Winter," "Christmas Greens," "Rhode Island Grasses," and "Go Wild With Wild Plants." The Committee is also increasing the usefulness of the Plant Discovery Boxes by adding materials suitable for children in kindergarten through grade three.

During this time the June plant sales grew in number of plants sold and in profits, and added some new features. Yellow and white striped tents provided shade for plants and people and lent a festive air to the sale. A plant-sitting area allowed over-burdened customers a place to leave their plants while they shopped for more. A silent auction, with donations of special plants from members and nurseries, became a popular and profitable addition.

In late 1994 a new Seed Starters group sprouted, this time on the west side of the bay. It met the needs of those who either didn't want to travel to Portsmouth or worked during the week and wanted to meet on Saturday morning. With the help of URI professors (and RJWPS members) William Eddleman and Brian Maynard and Propagation Chair Brian Core, the Seed Starters West group was able to use the East Farm facilities at URI.

During this period the Newsletter continued to provide members with interesting articles and news of the society. In addition, it increased the number of Dorothy Swift's thoughtful notes about plant-related books, occasionally supplied recipes for cooking with wild plants, and began to accept advertising, at first only from members, later from those in the "green" industry.

New members were welcomed to the Society at Family Bathe-cues in 1994, 1995, and 1996. Generously hosted by RIWPS member Roberta Johnson and her husband Gordon, the celebrations often included a seed exchange, plant walks, plant sales and Dick Donnelly's famous jonnycakes.

Efforts to protect Sea Lavender advanced in 1994 when RIWPS received permission from the Audubon Society and the state and federal governments to place signs on their coastal properties. Roland Mergener, Peter Lockwood, and other members of the Stewardship Committee (formerly Preservation and Protection) made and posted signs informing the public about the law prohibiting the picking of Sea Lavender. Recently plant rescue policies have been studied and inventory training sessions have been conducted to further RIWPS habitat protection goals.

Outreach to other environmental groups, always an important purpose of RIWPS, has increased in recent years. RIWPS has participated in various ways with many state and regional groups. A newsletter exchange with other botanical and native plant societies in Eastern United States has provided ideas for RIWPS. The Society publishes a Resource - List of Speakers and Walk Leaders willing to conduct programs for other groups, and RIWPS' displays are frequently taken to the conferences and annual meetings of other organizations.