

Giving Back to Horticulture: Jane Steffey

by Carole Ottesen

“I GREW UP in a big old house with good garden space. That’s where I learned what I wanted to do,” recalls AHS member Jane Steffey, a former columnist for *American Horticulturist* magazine and garden editor for *The Washington Post*. A lifelong love of gardening and the science behind it, coupled with fond memories of her long association with AHS, prompted Steffey, who is now retired, to recently donate \$50,000 to the Society to be used for staff education.

Steffey grew up in Williamsport, Maryland, a town of 2,000 near Hagerstown. She attended Hood College in nearby Frederick, making the journey to and from school on a trolley that went over the mountain between Frederick and Hagerstown. After graduating from Hood in 1931, Steffey began a career as an economist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Because her job required frequent relocation, however, she had little opportunity to develop a garden at any one place.

After moving to Washington following World War II, she joined AHS and soon became a volunteer. She remembers getting to know John Creech, a former director of the U.S. National Arboretum and AHS board member, as “a kid, just home from the war.” She enjoyed the chance to interact with horticulturists like Creech and other dedicated gardeners, and volunteering at River Farm finally gave her a chance to at least garden vicariously.

“I certainly have fond recollections of working at AHS,” says Steffey. “There were a number of volunteers like me who lived in the area and helped out with the seed exchange. I remember while I was still working, I stayed late into the night typing labels for envelopes. Other nights, when we had a group together to work on it, we went to the arboretum to do the labels. It was a lot of work, but it was wonderful.”

In 1971, she retired from the government and soon began a second career as a garden writer. She became a columnist for *The Washington Post*, served as a horticultural advisor to AHS, and was an editor and columnist for *American Horticulturist*, as this magazine was then named. Her assignments on the magazine included answering members’ gardening questions—a task that evolved into the Society’s Gardeners Information Service—and a popular regular column titled “Strange Relatives” that explored the intriguing and often unexpected relationships within plant families. “Serious study of any family of plants affords a marvelous insight into the wonders and contrasts in the vegetable kingdom,” she wrote in a December 1981 article on the cashew family.

“She loved research and noodling out facts about plants,” recalls garden writer and editor Barbara W. Ellis, a former co-worker who was editor of *American Horticulturist* for several years. “I learned a lot from her about finding out the small and fascinating facts about plants. After reading her columns, you looked at your garden in a whole different way.”

“It was a wonderful part of life,” says Steffey of her work in horticulture. Her generous gift will enable others to advance their education in the field that brought her so much satisfaction.

“The redolence of a golden flower or a whiff of super-sweetness from a lavender tail of inflorescence leads us to explore the background of the givers of such sensual pleasures. Lo and behold! These flowering beauties have some skeletons in the family closet; some of their relatives are poisoners. The plot thickens as the golden trumpet itself is revealed to be a killer.”

(from “Strange Relatives: The Logania Family,” *American Horticulturist*, August 1981, pp. 4–7)



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