

History of Cleveland Botanical Garden

The story of the Garden starts in 1916 when Eleanor Squire donated her collection of 250 horticultural books to the Garden Club of Greater Cleveland, which housed the books at the Museum of Art.

On January 24, 1930, six members of the Garden Club (Mrs. Thomas P. Howell, Mrs. William G. Mather, Mrs. Walter C. White, Mrs. Charles A. Otis, Mrs. John Sherwin and Mrs. Windsor T. White) decided the small library deserved a dedicated home, and they conceived a plan to transform an empty, brick boathouse along Wade Lagoon into a garden center that would house the collection of horticultural books and serve as a place for people to learn about plants and gardening. On December 4, 1930, The Cleveland Garden Center opened its doors to the public, becoming the first civic garden center in the United States. The purpose of the new Garden Center was “to promote such knowledge and love of gardening as will result in a more beautiful community.”

In the beginning, free admission, gardening exhibits and lectures were offered to the public. After two years, more Cleveland-area garden clubs were asked to participate in educational programs; and The Cleveland Garden Center was reorganized as The Garden Center of Greater Cleveland in 1933, offering individual memberships and affiliations with other local garden clubs. In 1937, The Garden Center of Greater Cleveland was incorporated as a non-profit organization.

Through the late 1940s and 1950s, The Garden Center grew its endowment and membership and became increasingly involved with the Greater Cleveland community. In 1959, a flash flood along East Boulevard prompted leaders of The Garden Center to consider finding a new location with more space and higher ground. A new site for The Garden Center was found just to the north on land that previously had housed the Cleveland Zoo from 1889 to 1907. The Garden Center of Greater Cleveland opened at its new location at 11030 East Boulevard on January 12, 1966.

The Herb Garden of the Western Reserve Herb Society became the first garden space to be developed, with its dedication on September 5, 1969. Today, 10 acres of outdoor gardens delight guests throughout the year.

C.W. Eliot Paine became director of The Garden Center on September 1, 1970, and he continued to expand the educational offerings of The Garden Center with a varied curriculum of courses, clinics and workshops.

In the beginning of 1994, The Garden Center of Greater Cleveland changed its name to Cleveland Botanical Garden. That same year, Brian Holley became director of the Garden and started developing a more sophisticated educational program that would better serve local youth while also raising awareness of and support for the Garden from the Greater Cleveland community.



The results of this effort included a year-round conservatory; the creation of Hershey Children’s Garden; and Green Corps, a community outreach work-study program aimed at teaching underserved teenagers about gardening.

The Eleanor Armstrong Smith Glasshouse opened in July 2003. This 18,000-square-foot glass conservatory became the first of its kind, focusing on the flora and fauna of two distinct biomes — the spiny desert of Madagascar and the tropical rainforest of Costa Rica.

In 2007, Natalie Ronayne became executive director of the Garden. In 2011, Ronayne, the Garden staff and Board of Directors implemented a “Vision for Our Vibrant Future,” which called for the 2012 renovation of the Garden’s original 1966 wing, including the addition of a new library and rare-book space and multi-purpose hall, as well as additional upgrades and additions to the gardens.

In 2014, Cleveland Botanical Garden integrated with The Holden Arboretum, creating the 13th largest public garden in the United States.