



THE BOTANIC GARDEN  
OF SMITH COLLEGE

# Botanic Garden News

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## William I. P. Campbell Horticulturist Emeritus

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On October 31, 2000, William I. P. Campbell, Horticulturist Emeritus of Smith College, died at the age of ninety-eight in Amherst, Massachusetts. He is survived by Alice, his wife of 68 years, five grandchildren, twelve great-grandchildren, and members of the family in Scotland. Two daughters, Gay Cross and Jean Vaillancourt, died earlier.

Bill Campbell's stalwart leadership guided the Smith College Botanic Garden through the middle years of the twentieth century. He saw the campus landscape through recovery from the ravages of the great hurricane of 1938, the difficult years of World War II, and the construction projects that followed in the 1950s and 1960s: Wright Hall, the Fine Arts Center, and the Center for the Performing Arts, each in its way a challenge to the integrity of an ever more complex and sprawling institution.



William Campbell with Mums, 1947  
Photo courtesy of Smith College Archives



President Neilson assisting with the planting of a Scotch Elm at the time of his retirement in 1939. Bill Campbell is second from the left, next to the piper.

Bill was born William Iverach Peace Campbell in Boxboroughshire, Scotland in 1902, although he often joked that the initials "I.P." were bestowed "because they didn't cost anything." Following an apprenticeship in gardening, he studied for three years at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, graduating with a specialty in Horticulture. He came to the United States in 1928. Nearly a decade later, while he was supervising the Gardens of the Nations at Radio City in New York, a fellow Scotsman, Smith President William Allan Neilson, persuaded him to take up the duties of College horticulturist. At that time, the campus plantings, laid out by the firm of Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot in the early 1890s, were approaching maturity, fulfilling an original

intention that the entire College grounds should serve as an arboretum. However, overnight and within a year, the hurricane would provide a context for one of Bill's favorite recollections: President Neilson asked the extent of the damage; Bill responded, "We lost two hundred trees on the campus proper"; and the president replied, "And what, sir, is the campus improper?" That Bill cherished this conversation exemplifies his typical response to disruptions and disasters: problems were recognized with regret and a kind of wry humor. Then the staff of the Gardens Department, under Bill's unflinching supervision, moved to work out their solutions: in this case the task of replacing the trees was made an opportunity for improving the plant collections, mostly through donations of living tributes and memorials.

Early in World War II, when Dorothy May Anderson left Northampton to serve in the Office of Strategic Services, Bill replaced her as College Landscape Architect, assuming duties he carried to retirement. Similarly, in 1947 when Dorcas Brigham retired from teaching in the Department of Botany, he took on responsibility for the popular two-semester course in horticulture, a class he taught to tremendous acclaim for more than twenty years. His teaching went far beyond his students in the classroom; almost all of us who knew him will recall his patient, good-humored gardening advice, his careful answers to our often simple-minded questions. There was, in addition, a welcome lightheartedness to his approach; horticultural activities were to be viewed as sources of pleasure, not anxiety; the campus landscape was here to be enjoyed, if sometimes fretted over. [I recall when a colleague's wife complained about the bright hues of the flowers in the newly opened Spring Bulb Show. Bill quietly assured her he'd take special pains on her



William Campbell with Richard Munson during a visit in 1993

behalf with the changing botanical exhibit in Burton Hall that week. The display, soon assembled, featured bright magenta-pink azaleas, orange fritillarias, their fragrance wafting through the building's heating ducts, and pots of yellow tulips; the horticultural jest drew visitors for days!]

His retirement in 1971 was celebrated to the strains of bagpipes by a gala event in the Alumnae House. Bill and Alice then departed for a trip to Holland and their native Scotland. On returning, they moved from their home in Williamsburg to Mount Dora, Florida, where Bill focused his still-abundant energies on gardening and playing golf. In 1978 Bill returned to the College to receive a Smith College Medal for his service to the College and community; and for more than two decades after that the Campbells were regular, if seasonal, visitors to the campus, when his familiar figure could be seen inspecting the Rock Garden or the benches in the Lyman Plant House, assessing the condition of the grounds and, though not too frequently, pointing out occasions for improvement.

Bill recognized that few gardens outlive their creators, one of the sadder facts of landscape history, and sometimes described his years at Smith as a systematic, persistent attempt to deal with a series of unwelcome challenges (he illustrated this with slides showing clematis vines that were rescued time and again, shifted onto and off of various supports as the campus changed around them.) Nonetheless, gardens at educational institutions fare better perhaps than most, and through the last three decades of the twentieth century, many of Bill's plantings remained essentially intact. The row of glossy abelias in front of the Alumnae House, in flower from August till the hardest frosts; the yellow jasmine and the fragrant viburnum, tucked into warm niches where they bloom in early spring; the magnificent dawn redwood at the edge of Burton Lawn; the endangered *Franklinia* in the Rock Garden, still blooming in November; and the clumps of Dexter rhododendrons. These are a part of his heritage, but his greater legacy is surely a tradition for appreciation of the College grounds, for considering the campus landscape integral to our own experience of the place.



William Campbell in the Lyman Plant House  
Bulb Show 1957