

# Horticultural Heroes

With her sunny smile and contagious laugh,  
Sara Broyles leads a group of volunteers that care  
for the historical gardens at Chatham Manor...  
one happy rosebud at a time.

by NICHOLAS ADDISON THOMAS

*Joe Ruedi of the National Park Service and Master Gardener Sara Broyles enjoy their work and the camaraderie of those volunteers who join them weekly to weed, dead-head, and prune Chatham's historic gardens.*

**T**here's a special connection that exists between mankind and Mother Nature. Anyone who has tended to backyard gardens or nurseries can attest to that. There's just something magical about planting your hands in the earth's soil and letting the detritus of history flow through your fingers. It's even more rewarding when you can use that passion for all-things plants to help improve the aesthetics of your community.

**Just ask Sara Broyles**, volunteer coordinator for the historic gardens at Fredericksburg's Chatham Manor.

"There's no better feeling than knowing you're playing a role in something bigger than yourself; that you're improving a part of your neighborhood that touches many people," said Broyles.

Chatham Manor, one of the region's more prominent landmarks, was built between 1768 and 1771 by William Fitzhugh. Affixed on a high ridge overlooking the Rappahannock River, the Georgian-style mansion has played an integral role in local history. It was a flourishing plantation until the Civil War, when it was used by Union troops as a headquarters and hospital. Afterward, Chatham fell on hard times typical of large plantations in that day. It passed through a series of owners, with land parcels being sold off until it consisted of 30 acres, a fraction of the 1,288 acres it had originally been.

In 1920, Chatham was bought by Helen

and Col. Daniel Devore, who endeavored to restore the historic structure to its colonial roots. They hired Ellen Shipman, a well-known landscape architect from New England, to put in a Colonial Revival garden where a cornfield had been. Shipman liked to keep the plan simple, using lush, herbaceous borders, often in a color scheme of blues, whites, yellows and pinks. The Devores were pleased to share their beautiful garden, and, much like today, it was often included in garden tours and featured in magazines.

In 1931, Chatham was sold to John Lee Pratt, who, in the mid-1950s, simplified the gardens by removing the labor-intensive perennial beds and adding more boxwood. Before he passed away, he willed the property to the National Park Service. Since then, Chatham Manor has been an official part of the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Thankfully, the significance of the Shipman garden was not lost on them. In 1984, an interpretive



*Chatham Manor is the largest National Park Service garden in Virginia, and Sara is always happy to welcome new volunteers.*



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restoration of the garden was held, and it is this garden that Broyles and her fellow volunteers now maintain.

“We still have plans from the garden Shipman created in the 1920s, as well as some pictures and descriptions from magazine articles of that time,” said Broyles. “We are working to re-introduce some of the plants she had. Sometimes this is easy, other times it’s pretty tough. We hope to someday have it back to its true form.”

Broyles and her team of volunteers are dedicated supporters of Virginia’s Master Gardener’s Program. A member since 2003, Broyles has found a new role in the community since her retirement; a role that affords her, and others like her, an opportunity to give back to the region through their love of horticulture. Much like the vibrant garden they tend, the Master Gardener’s Program is rooted in history.

The Master Gardener’s Program was created in 1972 with the intention of recruiting volunteers to help communities answer their public’s horticultural needs. Master Gardeners are volunteers for the Cooperative Extension Service (CES), a nationwide, non-credit, educational network that has offices in every state. These offices are staffed by one or more experts who provide useful, practical and research-based information to agricultural producers, small business owners, youth, consumers and others in respective neighborhoods.

To become a Master Gardener in Virginia, one must complete the training program conducted by a Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) agent, pass an examination and volunteer a minimum of 50 hours per year through a local VCE office. The Program is open to anyone interested in gardening, regardless of their experience or ability. The only necessary requirement is the willingness to

learn and then share that knowledge with the public. After passing the required course— which occurs in the fall in the Fredericksburg area— participants get to volunteer their gardening skills and apply their newfound knowledge.

“I had heard of the program after attending local ‘First Saturday in the Garden’ sessions,” said Broyles. “After retiring, I took the Master Gardener Course and learned of the numerous volunteer opportunities available. Chatham Manor is close to my home, and I already knew one of the volunteers working there, so it worked out perfectly. It’s wonderful! I get to make a mark in a place I love.”

Like her peers, Broyles is adamant about improving the Fredericksburg community. She and other volunteers often spend time volunteering at plant clinics, offering educational programs to the public and maintaining other historic gardens for the public’s viewing pleasure. The goal of these initiatives is to help people put research-based knowledge to work for economic prosperity, environmental stewardship and an improved quality of life. And then there’s the desire to emphasize the beauty of Fredericksburg, namely Chatham Manor.

As Master Gardeners, the local volunteers help the National Park Service employees maintain the grounds and gardens of Chatham Manor. This can last a few hours, or sometimes, the better half of a day. It’s an arduous job that requires a strict attention to detail, a love for all things horticulture and



*Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The air is filled with a sweet scent when the roses bloom at Chatham, early 20th-century sculpture adorns much of the grounds, Paulette Watson pauses from her task, early season flowers are a welcome sight, Ruth Ellen Richardson filling her container with weeds.*

*At right: Joe Ruedi displays a 19th-century style lawnmower.*

a commitment to teamwork. And yet, it offers innumerable rewards in the form of exercise, confidence-building and meeting new people.

“This is a great opportunity to meet and work with others with similar interests, forge strong friendships and get a lot of satisfying work done,” said Broyles, who says her favorite part of volunteering is the camaraderie. “There is a sense of satisfaction in accomplishing a job well done, even if the jobs never seem to be finished. Being able to see the garden improve as new plants come into bloom is a delight.”

When the volunteers arrive in the morning, they begin the day by working together on a single large task—like getting flats of pansies or petunias planted—or they break up individually and tend to their favorite responsibilities. Some prefer to deadhead spent roses, rip weeds and Bermuda grass out of beds or trim bushes. One man in particular likes to tackle overgrown vines, chopping and pulling them out of the trees just beyond the garden walls.

“We are usually working in the perennial borders and rose beds of the walled garden, although sometimes we tend to the boxwood hedges on the riverside of the house, or we help prune the grapevines near the entrance area,” said Broyles. “We each have tasks to do, and the challenge is that there is always more to do than ever gets done!”

While it is rewarding detailing a historic garden for the viewing pleasure of the entire community, it’s also a time-consuming responsibility. Each task, no matter how small, requires immeasurable. For the vol-

unteers, though, it’s worth it because each assignment adds value to the landscape. In many respects, these Master Gardeners are the region’s own green-thumb, education brigade, teaching the art of planting, pruning and pulling to achieve perfection. According to Broyles, the most challenging part of the job is keeping the garden true to Ellen Shipman’s vision.

“We’re experimenting with substitutes that are easier but still in keeping with the look Shipman would have wanted. Of course, this is done on a budget, so we start some plants from seed and order plants and flowers in small numbers and sizes,” said Broyles. “If a plant does well, we can divide it and plant in another part of the garden. If it dies, we try something else.”

It’s this approach that has helped the gardens of Chatham Manor spring to life in the past few years. By working long hours upgrading and maintaining the historic landscape, the Master Gardeners are working to restore a look and feel that’s been lost for decades. More importantly, they’ve been able to provide the community with a glimpse into local history. Through teamwork and a collective desire to improve their community, the volunteers serve as proof that a little love goes a long way.

“There is something at Chatham for every volunteer,” said Broyles. “Chatham is simply a beautiful, peaceful place to be, seemingly far away from everyday noise and cares. Places like this need to be maintained so that others can appreciate it as much as we do.”



Chatham is always looking for more volunteers to work in their gardens. Anyone who loves to garden is welcome to join the other volunteers. Master Gardeners Program meetings, sponsored by MGACRA, occur on the third Wednesday evening of every month. For more information about the program and volunteering opportunities in Fredericksburg, visit [www.mgacra.org](http://www.mgacra.org). To learn more about the gardens of Chatham Manor, visit [www.nps.gov/frsp/chatham.htm](http://www.nps.gov/frsp/chatham.htm).



Clockwise from far left: Autumn Joy sedum in bloom, roses climbing along the walls, Chatham volunteers (from left to right) Sara Broyles, Caroline Zimmerman, Carolyn Taylor, Jean Johnson, Melanie Ringer, Maggie Hall, NPS employee, and Jean Ravinsky.

