

## Area AI - Lexington Gardens



*Courtesy Lexington Historical Society*

Lexington Gardens Inc., originally also known as the Lexington Botanic Garden, was established in 1929 at 93 Hancock Street for the purpose of displaying and testing hardy plants. The Botanic Garden was the brainchild of Stephen F. Hamblin of 45 Parker Street who was a professor of botany/horticulture at Harvard's School of Landscape Architecture and the former director of the Harvard Botanic Garden which was the oldest establishment of its kind in operation in America until it closed in the late 1920s. Hamblin envisioned that the new Lexington Botanic Garden would be "the center of practical horticulture in New England". He moved his operations from the corner of Linnaean and Garden Streets in Cambridge, where it had existed since 1807, to 93 Hancock Street in Lexington. The eleven acres of land with farmhouse provided ample room for gardens and the fertile land had formerly been used as a market garden. The first year, more than 5,000 packets of seeds of rare perennials were moved from the former Garden at Harvard as well as a number of plants. Soon after the property was purchased, greenhouses were erected.

Hamblen envisioned that someday there would be 20,000 species of perennials and their varieties onsite. Initial plans called for special gardens of at least five acres, of some 25 types. Three were already under construction in December 1929. The proposed gardens included a one-acre Rose Garden with 500 different climbers and 1,000 bushes; a formal garden; a trial garden of rare perennials large enough to hold 2,000 species; a hardy border for 8 months of bloom; a garden of 1,000 annuals; bulb, fern, lily and primrose gardens; rock, marsh, woodland and wild gardens; special seasonal displays; display gardens of Iris, Peony, Chrysanthemum, Dahlia, and Gladiolus; special plantings of dwarf evergreens, sweet herbs and color effects, and an unheated greenhouse for alpine plants. The organization's motto was "To grow, test and display all hardy herbaceous plants". Over the years the garden continued to grow throughout the exchange of seeds or plants of unusual perennial plants.

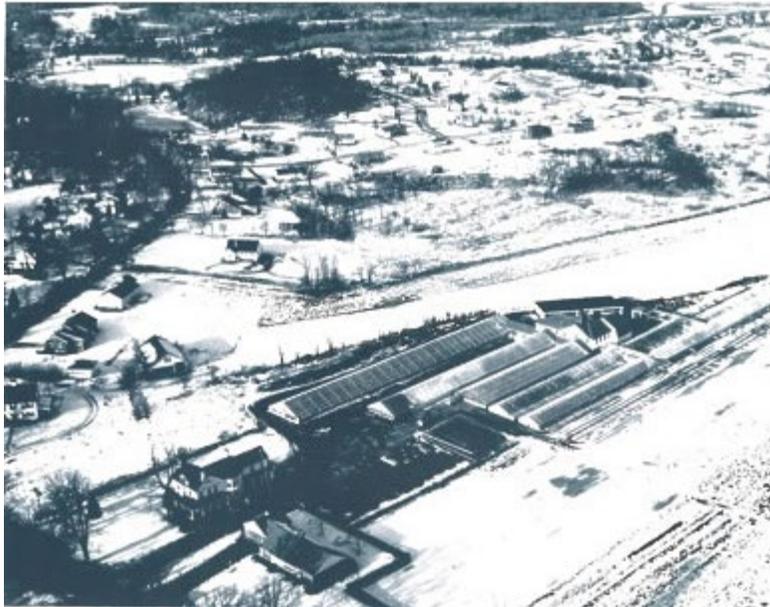
The Depression slowed progress in the development of the facility but in 1932 a hill of four acres for an alpine and marsh garden was established and about 2,000 new perennials were put out in the spring. After four years of preliminary work, the Lexington Botanic Garden opened to the general public in the spring of 1936. Writing in 1936, Hamblin noted that the title to the land had been made secure and the grounds would be open at all hours to visitors. To meet the cost of operation, vegetables were grown on the farm and plants were to be sold from the greenhouse. Surplus seeds and rare plants were also available for purchase with members given first consideration. Growing, testing, and labeling rare plans was begun on a large scale. Professor Hamblin was available at the Garden on Mondays and Tuesdays. Most of the labor building the garden was volunteer and at irregular times. Hamblin also produced Lexington Leaflets, informational pamphlets about perennials which were available for sale.





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During World War II the Millicans also raised chickens and built a barn with a large chimney to serve as a hen house. Chickens were only raised here for about five years and raising small garden plants became the focus. At one point the manager of Woolworth's in Boston stopped by the stand and ordered 20,000 dozen plants including pansies and Sweet William. In the early 1960s the entire business converted from wholesale to retail.



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In 1971, after a nationwide search, the property was purchased by Pepperidge Farms who wanted to go into the garden business. In the 1970s Lexington Gardens became one of the backdrops for the nationally-popular *The Victory Garden*, America's oldest gardening television program. Originally the show was filmed beside WGBH's Allston studios (no longer extant). Lexington Gardens was the second site (it was later filmed at the home of producer Russell Morash in Lexington and at another site west of Boston). The program was conceived in 1975 to respond to tough economic times of the early 1970s and an increased interest in self-sufficiency related to the energy crisis. The show was intended to show viewers how to get the most from their own plot of land, both in terms of floral beauty and vegetable bounty.



Plans are currently underway to redevelop the eleven acre parcel for housing.

