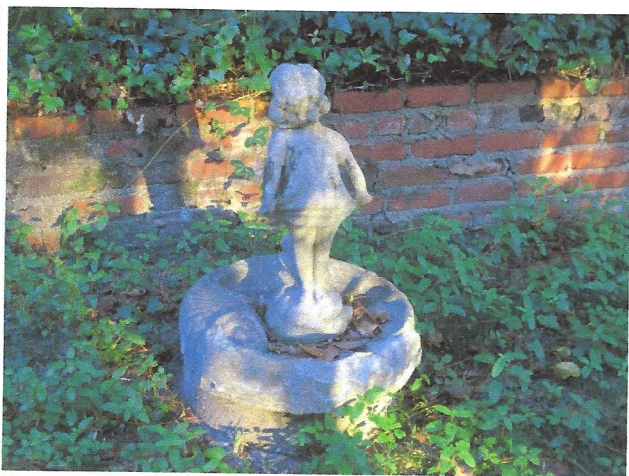


## Thanksgiving for a Half-Century of Gardening Education & Fun!

by Matt Hunter

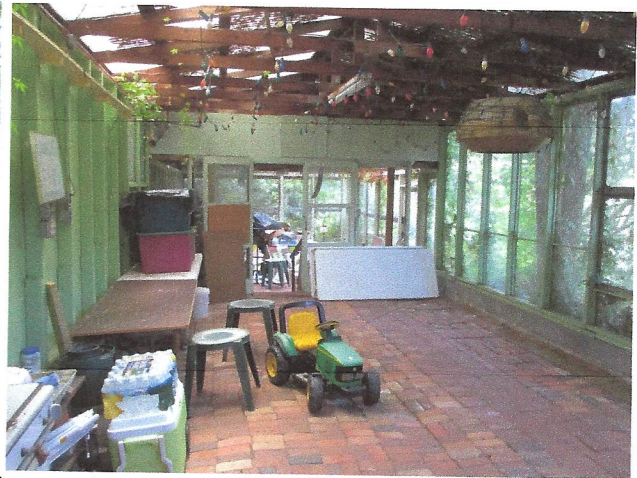
In the 1960's the Ross, Huffman, and Beale families at 2318 to 2400 Metts Avenue, Wilmington NC, cooperatively combined their three 700 foot deep backyards into one gigantic gardening area. Together the area featured a wide variety of plants, statuary, greenhouses of various sizes, and water features, in a beautiful semi-woodland theme. The long leaf pines provided a high canopy supplying dappled shade. Closer to the ground were many woody ornamentals including camellias, dogwoods, and azaleas. Visitors could wander back on a gentle slope to a slow-flowing creek with a few carefully chosen water features. To the casual visitor it was an intriguing walk in the garden. To the more serious gardeners it was a fascinating tour illustrating many varieties of garden techniques and decors. Scattered throughout the yards were interesting garden related structures such as cold frames, mini-greenhouses, statues, stone fireplaces, and multi-level potted plant stands. All together the three back yards provided a fantastical break from the busy activities of a growing Wilmington.



Some of the many interesting features scattered throughout the gardens at Metts Avenue.

During the first several years the original leader, George Ross, guided the gardening activities of an eclectic grouping of participants and organizations. By the early 1970's George Ross and Cape Fear Technical Institute (now Cape Fear Community College) were cooperating on a variety of courses and workshops on horticulture. Some of these courses, such as the one on hanging baskets lasted several years with great interest. Another course was basic training on using a hobby greenhouse. The class was so informative, practical, and fun that many of the students continued to meet together long after the official class ended. Subsequently The Hobby Greenhouse Club (HGC) was established. The club had a firm foundation for the next fifty years. Since those early years the HGC has experimented with many different activities, locations, and ideas. This has enriched the lives of countless gardeners throughout southeastern North Carolina for some five decades. As you will learn from this article, there are many reasons to give thanks for the past fifty years of our beloved Hobby Greenhouse Club!





The greenhouse at 2318 Metts Avenue still functions today as a hub for various events.

During the club's early years the meetings and activities were usually held at George's main greenhouse at 2318 Metts Avenue. The main greenhouse, one of several original greenhouses on the property, still stands and functions today as a hub for plant shows, sales, storage, and self-guided tours held annually. The property continues to be owned by dedicated Ross family members who make facilities available to the club during selected events. However the club membership continued to grow past the original group of former students. Eventually the membership grew beyond the capacity of the main greenhouse. A new meeting location was needed. For many years the HGC has conducted most regular meetings, with occasional exceptions, at the New Hanover County (NHC) Arboretum auditorium. Usually this is quite sufficient space for the membership attendance. However some special speakers boost interest to "standing room only." When special events, such as hurricanes or pandemics disrupt normal activities the club makes adjustments and carries on into the future.



Two views of the George Ross Memorial Greenhouse at the NHC Arboretum.

One early tradition has continued uninterrupted: experienced members eagerly share their knowledge, gardening skills, and socialize with anyone looking for answers. New members typically join with their own special interests and concerns. These new members immediately discover there is already at least one experienced member who has quality experience in a wide



variety of interests. Together the membership is a vast resource of gardening knowledge and experience available for anyone seeking help. And new members often introduce brand new, updated gardening know how. This continuous, free sharing of information and skills continues to expand. Membership growth has prompted experiments with several initiatives. Some initiatives have proved very productive so these initiatives continue into the present day. They include annual horticultural scholarship grants to local community colleges, special donations to build greenhouses such as the George Ross Memorial Greenhouse at the NHC Arboretum, seasonal shows & sales by members, donations to assist in the maintenance of the Metts property, creative planter competitions, presentations on interesting topics, and other public service activities through the years.



A specialty citrus grower from South Carolina packs the house at one of our monthly meetings!

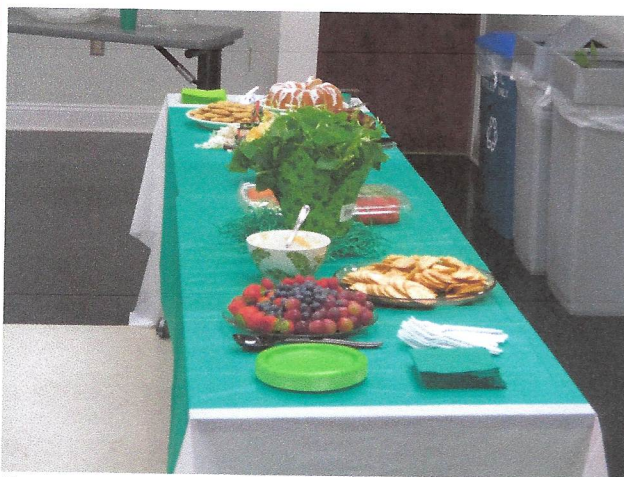
One unique event has been an annual Hobby Greenhouse Tour. Members are rightfully proud of their greenhouses which can be very impressive, innovative, and unusual. About 50% of the active members do have one or more hobby greenhouses. Those greenhouses run the gamut between mini to large, pre-engineered kits to hodge-podge with salvaged materials, technically sophisticated to very basic, and truly beautiful to barely functional. Because there is no requirement to own a greenhouse to become a member many prospective owners join the club to learn about the different aspects of greenhouses. This is smart because of the very wide variety of greenhouses that are available and the significant investment of time or money that can be involved. Through the years much progress has been made in the greenhouse industry. Today very sophisticated hobby greenhouses with many optional features are available at economical prices. A great selection of these many greenhouses is included in each annual tour. Regardless of individual characteristics the annual greenhouse tour is always a huge hit in the Wilmington gardening scene!





Proud owners welcome fellow members & the public to their greenhouses for annual tours.

Other recurring and much attended events include regular meeting refreshments and special holiday celebrations. Members are encouraged to bring their tasty specialties. One never knows what delectable entrees, side dishes, snacks, and desserts may be presented. Members take special pride in bringing their favorite offerings to intrigue their friends and contribute to the richness of the feast. It is rumored that some folks join the club just to share in the friendships and scrumptious pot lucks!



Just some of the many goodies available at both regular meetings and special events!

Of course no review of the past fifty years would be complete without mention of the spectacular plant shows and sales conducted annually on Metts Avenue. Past years have seen Spring, Summer, and Fall seasonal sales. However the biggest and most well attended sale has been the Spring show and sale. The locals from the neighborhood always show up to see what new treasures (plants) will be offered at the sales. However we do get our share of new visitors shopping for plants to add to their properties. The participating members often propagate huge numbers of new plant specimens from their existing collections. North Carolina, originally a very agricultural state, still provides encouragement to gardeners and farmers who propagate original specimens from their existing collections. This simplifies and streamlines the details of conducting



these plant sales. The individual growers get the bulk of profits. And the club gets a small share to help fund operations, occasionally help with upkeep of the Metts Avenue property, and fund scholarships to local community colleges. Through the years the club has donated over \$25,000 to local community colleges! Further simplifying things the club has no paid employees. And many members make personal contributions of labor and funds to streamline activities. The plants offered at the sales often have tropical or semi-tropical aspects only available through the uses of greenhouses and conservatories. This makes the sales particularly interesting as sources of new plants for gardeners in the area.



Propagators love displaying and explaining what they grow and their experiences.

As previously mentioned greenhouse techniques, variety, and technology has developed significantly during the past fifty years. The techniques and technologies used to operate The Hobby Greenhouse Club have also developed in parallel. Today in addition to monthly meetings the club routinely communicates using emails, facebook, a blog, and a great website ([www.hobbygreenhouseclub.org](http://www.hobbygreenhouseclub.org)). Such varied techniques of communication enable great flexibility in operations. Events such as tropical storms, hurricanes and pandemics occasionally hit our beautiful coast. When challenged we are quick to reschedule, reposition, and "muddle-through" until things settle down again. The future may hold additional proven technologies such as virtual meetings on specific topics or long distance virtual-visiting speakers.

What ever the future may hold it is appropriate to give thanks to the many members of the general public, dedicated club members and club leaders who have made and continue to make this great club so successful. If you would like to learn more about our club please start with a visit to our website, [www.hobbygreenhouseclub.org](http://www.hobbygreenhouseclub.org). There you will find many specifics regarding meeting times and locations, special events, and helpful contacts for further information. All the best to you in your gardening adventures!

Special thanks for this article goes to Ginny Vail, Marion Kreh, and all the past and present members of The Hobby Greenhouse Club.