

## HENRY ERNEST DOWNER

1885 - 1968

Henry Ernest Downer, Horticulturist Emeritus, who died in Poughkeepsie on September 8, 1968, was born on August 17, 1885 in Ryde, on the Isle of Wight. On March 12, 1912 he received a diploma from the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew and became head of its tropical propagating department. He left England, however, in 1912 and came to the United States.

After working a short while with commercial florists and on the estate of Thomas Alva Edison he went to Smith College in 1914 as horticulturist and stayed there for six years. In 1920 he came to Vassar College as College Gardener, became Superintendent of Grounds in 1922, was appointed Horticulturist as well as Superintendent of Grounds the next year, and retired in 1952. He taught courses in the principles of flower and vegetable gardening and in fruit and plant propagation. His campus walk was a feature of the morning activities of Founder's Day. With the able assistance successively of William Stopher and John Brown as head gardeners, he enhanced the beauty of the college grounds, whose landscaping had been continued by Loring Underwood, landscape architect of the college. In this he was fortunate for most of his career at Vassar in having an adequate and able staff, whose devotion he earned by his kindly thoughtfulness of them and their families. In 1942 the Trustees named two oak groves after him.

Professionally Henry Downer's activities and reputation spread increasingly beyond the campus. Until 1943 he was a member of the staff of Popular Gardening Magazine and a frequent Contributor to The Gardeners' Chronicle of America and other gardening magazines. From 1945 to 1949 he conducted a weekly column, "The Gardener's Forum," in the New York Herald Tribune and a weekly column on gardening for the New York Sun. He contributed a chapter on annuals and perennials to Gardening with the Experts (written by twelve noted horticulturists) in 1941 and an appendix to Montague Free's All About the Perennial Garden (Doubleday, 1952); and he was co-author with Fred J. Nisbet of Flowers and Roses, which appeared in 1962. Besides five articles written for Vassar publications, he contributed to the following encyclopedias: New Garden Encyclopedia (ed., HENRY ERNEST DOWNER (continued)

E.L.D. Seymour and others, Wise and Co., 1936), 10,000 Garden Questions (ed., F.F. Rockwell, American Garden Guild and Doubleday and Co., 1944), and the New Illustrated Encyclopedia of Gardening (ed., T.H. Everett, Graystone Press, 1960). He wrote How to Plant and Care for your Garden for the Home Service Booklets about 1939.

He and others contributed to Favorite Flowers in Color (ed., E.L.D.Seymour, Wise, 1948); and with John Strohm and Fred J. Nisbet he edited The Golden Guide to Flowers (New York, 1962). He was a member of the Hortus Society, a group of distinguished horticulturists from New York and New Jersey. He was a judge of the garden and flower displays in Cooperstown, N. Y., and of the New England Flower Show, and for many years a judge of the National and the International Flower Show. After his retirement he and his second wife conducted eight tours to famous gardens in Europe and in 1964 a tour around the world. Locally and in the county, too, he contributed much. The planters of dogwood on Main Street were put in at his advice in 1961. For many years from 1940 he was Chairman of the Town of Poughkeepsie Planning Commission, President of the Dutchess County Horticultural Society, superintendent of the flower show of the Dutchess County Fair, a director and secretary of the Vassar Bank before it merged with the First National Bank, and Chairman of the Board of the Vassar Office of the Marine National Bank of Southeastern New York from 1961 to 1967. He served on the Board of Education of the Arlington School District as auditor in 1930-31, clerk 1932-November 1933, and President, November 1933 - July 1936. Later he taught a course in practical gardening in the Arlington Adult Education Program. Henry Downer took a dim view of governmental handouts and man-made work in which men had little interest. As a citizen he was active in local politics, being informed, articulate, and fearless in expressing often tough-minded views. He was frequently the nemesis of the local politician whose performance did not meet high standards of honesty and good sense. As Superintendent of Grounds at Vassar he would

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never condone that lawns should be used as shortcuts and flower borders be picked from just because they were there -- and this applied to every member of the college community. He had a reverence for plants of all kinds and an insatiable curiosity for identifying plant material -- even if sometimes an inquirer's interest was casual. A man of principles and strong character, he truly had his feet on the ground which he deeply loved.

Richard Brooks

Gordon Post

Sven Sward, Chairman