Volunteer Spotlight
Nod Meyer

Nod Meyer downplays her green thumb, but the proof, as they say, is in the pudding. Or, in her case, the planting. Nod’s longtime volunteer work as a propagation assistant at the Dana Greenhouse has borne fruit, not only in the plants she’s helped grow from seed to maturity, but in the many other ways her talents and enthusiasm have benefited the Arboretum.

Nod has volunteered at the Arnold Arboretum for the better part of a quarter century. Her interest in the Arboretum was sparked when she was a student in the Radcliffe Seminars in Landscape Design (now the Landscape Institute of the Arnold Arboretum) in the 1970s. A landscape identification course with Joseph Hudak was her introduction to the Arboretum and its collections, though she notes that “growing up in Rhode Island, I had heard of the Arnold Arboretum and knew it was important. I didn’t realize how wonderful it was until I saw it for myself.”

At the time, her eleven children were grown and had started their own families, a brood that now includes 37 grandchildren. Though much of her free time, then as now, involved extensive travel—a wanderlust shared with her husband Henry—she was looking for a volunteer opportunity in line with her interests in nature and gardening when she learned that the Arboretum had an opening in the greenhouse. A friend erroneously predicted that she’d spend all of her time washing pots. “When I interviewed, Jack Alexander asked me all sorts of fierce questions and I wondered what I’d gotten myself into,” she confesses. At the time, the Arboretum was looking for a tour guide of the greenhouse facilities, “and they wanted someone who knew enough about plants to pull off dead leaves and find things that needed attention as they went along.”

For Nod, the greenhouse experience has been particularly rich. “It’s the learning, which happens every time I volunteer, and the terrific people at the Arboretum, the give-and-take that keeps volunteering interesting. I say give-and-take, but I really feel I gain far more than I give.” She adds that she has particularly enjoyed working side by side with distinguished plantsmen and the students who serve each summer in the greenhouse as Hunnewell Interns.

In the 1980s, Nod was asked to join the Arboretum Associates, a tightly knit group of individuals under the guidance of Mary Ashton, wife of former director Peter Ashton. The group raised funds to enable staff members to embark on special projects not covered by their annual budgets. Another activity the Associates became involved with was the Arboretum’s annual fall plant sale, started in 1980 as a way to distribute excess plant material from the Arboretum’s greenhouses. As a greenhouse volunteer and Associate, Nod was on board from the outset, often soliciting donations from nurseries and organizing the sale’s silent auctions. During the 1990s, she also served as a member of the Arboretum’s visiting committee, a group that advises the Overseers of Harvard University on the needs and future direction of the Arboretum.

Nod still volunteers occasionally at the greenhouse and has answered calls on the plant information hotline for several years. “I was sort of tricked into that one,” Nod says with a laugh. “They said, ‘It couldn’t be easier, all the books are there, you just look up the answers!’ It’s not that simple, but it’s been quite a learning experience!” Questions are compelling and run the gamut of horticultural problems. “The experience has been really encouraging, actually. People have very interesting questions about plants and about staying true to organic methods. Most calls used to be about neighborhood squabbles over the responsibility for untidy trees. These days callers seem much more informed about their gardens and their questions are quite thoughtful.”

Nod takes pride in seeing the results of her work at the greenhouses. She says that at the Arboretum, where most of the plants in the landscape are mature, “it’s interesting to work mostly among plants in their infancy. You really get an appreciation for the work and time that goes into making a collection. It’s exciting to see things you’ve planted as seeds grow strong and make their way out onto the grounds.”