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Sandy Flowers, Director of Horticulture at the Washington National Cathedral for the previous eight years, is now retired and lives in the midst of a Virginia forest, but her property is beautifully landscaped with small decorative trees, a flowing waterfall, and many flowering plants. There's an American wisteria vine that has been trained up and over her front porch and the birdhouse hanging from the Japanese snowbell (*Styrax*) tree has a cheerful chickadee family living in it. We met up with Sandy to talk about her career and her personal approach to landscaping.

**Sandy, will you tell us about your childhood? Where did you grow up and was there someone who influenced you toward gardening?**

I grew up in Fairfax County, Virginia, so you could throw a stone practically to every place I've lived in my childhood. But my maternal grandparents had a 10-acre farm in Dranesville, which was quite rural back then. That is where I was introduced to gardening. My grandparents were subsistence farmers so they grew all their own food and provided for quite a few other people in the area. My grandmother was an

amazing gardener. My grandfather had a general store in Dranesville and he also drove the milk truck down to Georgetown once a week. During the depression, my grandmother would pack up bags full of produce, get on the milk truck, be dropped off in Georgetown where she began by going door-to-door selling her homegrown fresh vegetables. Eventually she got a regular clientele who expected her to come, and they would ask her to bring dressed chickens, ready-made cakes, and other specialties. She would always bring two or three of her kids with her to help carry the bags back-and-forth.

We grandkids would stay with my grandparents during the summer. She had a huge vegetable garden and every fruit tree under the sun. She had a flower border around her vegetable garden, all the way down the driveway, and then a big border in the back full of perennials. She loved flowers! It was nothing fancy or even organized—she just grew everything and so I learned to love everything. Her favorite thing to say was “let’s walk around and see what’s coming up.” I still use that phrase today.

It’s still my favorite thing to go outside and see what’s coming up in the garden. Why do we want our suburban gardens to look the same all year long? They are mainly planted with evergreen foundation shrubs and turf grass, it’s the same all year. I learned from childhood that the heart of a perfect or an ideal landscape is the transition between seasons. The Japanese have names for 24 seasons, each split into finer divisions of about five days. Plant life changes much more frequently than just the four seasons that we mark. It’s totally cool to see things come up, bloom, see them expand, and then see them fade. The next thing is always coming so it’s always interesting.

My mother never took to gardening but my two aunts were avid gardeners. My aunt Marian lived nearby and I was often getting called to come help her. My aunt Kathryn, who just died at almost 98, lived in Florida, so her gardening experience was with tropical plants.

**It sounds like you had enough influence in your life to be self-taught, but did you go to school for horticulture?**

I went to school, but not for horticulture. I have a master’s degree in nutrition. I originally wanted to be a PE teacher because I was an athlete. But I busted up my knee and had to bail out of that. I took a hiatus from college and was a florist for about five years and learned floral design. I loved that work.

**How did you make the shift from being a florist to working with landscapes?**

I decided I wanted to design things big enough to stand in. So I shifted to landscapes. I took an internship at River Farm with the American Horticulture Society, and then I saw an advertisement in the Washington Post for a job as a gardener at the British Embassy. I knew I could really learn there and happily, I got the job. I stayed there for seven years and I loved it.

Then I took a job at Green Spring Garden in Alexandria, where I learned to be a manager. I started a master gardener program for them, ran the farmers' markets, and oversaw the garden plots. After that job, I managed a beautiful private garden in DC designed by Lila Fendrick. That's where I learned to maintain water features. They had three different water features, and no one knew how to maintain any of them. So I had to learn not to be afraid of water features. They are tricky. They are time consuming but add so much to a garden.

After seven years managing the private estate, I took the job as the Bishop's Gardener in 2013.

**The Bishop's Gardener: love that title! How are the gardeners organized at the Cathedral?**

There are six zones at the Cathedral and there's a gardener for each one. The Bishop's Gardener takes care of the Bishop's Garden, which includes the Nitze and Church House gardens. The three schools — NCS, Saint Albans and Beauvoir—each have their own designated gardener. There's a Cathedral Gardener who has a huge responsibility: the west front all the way around to the north and down to the woods and the amphitheater. And now he is responsible also for the Virginia Mae Center gardens. And the sixth is the turf manager of the playing fields. That landscape is 7 acres, and it needs to be kept nice because it faces all the neighbors.



A rose from the Bishop's Garden

I eventually moved from being the Bishop's Gardener up to Director of Horticulture, with the very able Evan Johnson as my assistant. Evan was wonderful: he was a really diligent, hard worker. He knew so much about the grounds in general because he had been there for so long. I was at the Cathedral from November of 2013 to my recent retirement in 2024.

**Your name is Sandy Flowers, which is so perfect. Has that always been your name?**

No, my first name was Sandy Smith, but I married Roger Flowers and after we parted I kept the name Sandy Flowers.

**So much of your work on the Cathedral grounds is supported by the All Hallows Guild. What is the process to get a project approved and paid for?**

That's a very good question and many people at the Cathedral don't know how that works. I would first bring the garden committee a design for a project for them to consider, and they would comment and make usually very good suggestions and we would incorporate them. Of course they would also ask, "what is this going to cost?" So we would then cost out not only the plants but the labor. If we were calling in someone to do stonework, we would call Serra Stone and others to get estimates for

all of that then the committee would review it and see whether it was within their regular operating budget or if they needed to ask the All Hallows Guild board for the money.

Some project requests come directly from the schools. NCS recently asked for a redo of the Curran Courtyard. The landscaping was done at the last minute of a construction project. (Unfortunately, if you have to get ready for a school opening or some other event the construction crew just slams in anything green that they can find. That happens in horticulture more than you would care to believe.)

So they came to me and said students want a pollinator-friendly garden and they want to bring hummingbirds and butterflies and so forth. So we created a design and they joined us to present it to the garden committee and it was approved. Once the funds were approved, we ordered the materials and the Horticulture team installed the garden. It is a much more enjoyable and usable garden space now.

The Cathedral has a great bargain in our landscape department—we don't have to make a profit on projects, so they can be done at wholesale cost. Our crew is so willing and capable. I enjoyed working with all of my people and they each have different skills and abilities that they bring to our projects.

We always run any kind of renovation through the All Hallows Guild Garden committee, not only looking for funds, but also for approval of the general concept. We try to keep everything cohesive on the close. AHG has the big picture in mind. You need to walk carefully aesthetically. There are some styles that will not fit. One of my loves is Japanese garden style, but I could not bring any of that to the Cathedral because it just doesn't fit with a Gothic cathedral. I don't think we need to keep the landscape in medieval England, but we want to keep the character of the place.

Frederick Law Olmsted designed the original design to be "park like." This is excellent because it gives the staff a lot of freedom to use their creativity. We are trying to include more native plants simply because we have learned this is important for our ecology.

**Tell us about the internship program, which is financially supported by the All Hallows Guild.**

It is a wonderful program. For up to 12 weeks in the summer we take 2 or 3 college

students and train them in horticultural work. We take advantage of their youthful strength and we give them our knowledge and experience. They don't just weed all the time! We want them to have positive, well-rounded experiences when they're with us. We take them on field trips to other professional gardens nearby and we give them a creative project to complete every year. That makes them research, think, and plan. We want them to learn.

The internship program takes time & effort to manage, but it is worth it—it's a great program. It benefits us and it benefits them. It teaches us what the next generation is learning and what we need to teach them to fill in the gaps. And really one of the best ways to learn gardening is to have hands in the dirt and knees on the ground.

We also teach them how to "see". We have a walkabout most mornings to start the day. Knowing how to look at the way the landscape changes over time is important. Many professional gardeners who are making a name for themselves are older. They have been gardening for decades and are still teaching well into their 80s or 90s. They are good because they have learned to pay attention and really "see" what the garden requires.

**Do you have any comments you'd like to make about the team of horticulturalists that you've left behind?**

The Horticulture team at the Cathedral is a terrific group of people. Some of them were there before I came to the Close. They are motivated, skilled, and *enjoy* working. We made it fun together, laughed and made jokes. If you're doing that kind of hard work, you need to have staff that can keep it light instead of complaining the whole time. Our staff doesn't complain, and I asked them to do some really, really hard things such as reworking beds after construction equipment has compacted the earth mercilessly.

**What are your plans for retirement?**

Well, I'm trying to get to home projects that I have let go a little long such as repainting the exterior of my house. I'll work in my garden, of course, and I always get calls to work on design projects for other people I know. I will volunteer at Flower Mart just to be part of the Cathedral community and see my friends. It was time to turn the Horticulture Department over to a new generation. It's time for Addie Schopf and Mike McGinnis to have a chance to grow and show their management skills. We need to open ourselves to change and that's another good

thing about not being locked into a historic design. You can open up to change. That's important in gardens and it's important in every aspect of our lives. I have lots to keep me busy here, but I'm looking forward to making space in my life and seeing what comes.