



## Volunteers in the Garden

Everyone loves a volunteer in the garden. It could be a morning glory, a coneflower, a cherry tomato plant, or, best of all, devoted community volunteers like longtime MSHS members and great gardeners Bill and Elsie Riggs.

Between the two of them, Bill and Elsie are part of just about every gardening group in Minnesota. Elsie is an Anoka County Master Gardener and a member of the Federated Garden Club of Minnesota. Both have belonged to MSHS since its days at Alderman Hall on the St. Paul campus of the University of Minnesota, and they are both fixtures of the Soil and Sunshine Garden Club. They are active with the Minnesota Daylily Society, the North Star Lily Society, the Iris Society of Minnesota, the Daffodil Society of Minnesota, the Minnesota Chapter of the North American Rock Garden Society, the Minnesota Peony Society, and the Minnesota Hosta Society.

For Bill and Elsie, digging in the dirt and volunteering their time go hand in hand. For years, they have been core volunteers for the horticultural society, clocking hours at the home and garden shows (their first volunteer activity with the society) and at the state fair, doing office work, unpacking boxes, selling lily bulbs, and doing just about anything that needs to be done in the name of northern gardening.

"We rely on volunteers such as Bill and Elsie because they understand how much we need them," says Rose Eggert, MSHS chief executive officer. "They are always there for us, whether it's to fold T-shirts, bag bulbs, or one of those last-minute projects. It's always fun to spend a little time visiting, too."

Membership in the specialty plant societies involves a full schedule of volunteering as well, usually in prepara-

tion for the popular society sales. In May, it is the digging, dividing, cleaning, and marking of daylily divisions for the annual sale. In the spring and fall, Elsie and Bill help package, label, and price bulbs for the North Star Lily Society sales. August involves digging and washing iris rhizomes at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. September brings the prepping of bulbs for the daffodil sale.

### Education and Friendship

"What I like most about belonging to the societies is the education you get," says Elsie. "You also make friends and that keeps you coming back and then you keep on learning. As a Master Gardener, it's nice to help people."

Bill and Elsie put what they learn into practice on their pie-shaped half-acre in Coon Rapids. "When we moved into our house nearly 40 years ago, all that grew in the yard was sand burrs," says Elsie. Through the years, the couple transformed their Anoka sand plain soil into rich garden loam through tireless composting and relentless amending. Now the massive perennial beds and borders that fill their yard display the fruits of their society memberships with countless varieties of spring-blooming bulbs, peonies, daylilies, iris, Asiatic lilies, and hostas.

Though they garden side by side, they each have their favorites in the garden, and as Bill puts it, there can be a bit of a "fight for ground space." Bill used to grow dahlias with a vengeance, with over 200 varieties blooming, but he has since retired the beautiful but



Volunteers extraordinaire, Elsie and Bill Riggs garden on a half-acre lot in Coon Rapids.

high-maintenance flower. He now hybridizes daylilies and the past season produced a red stunner that he hopes will make it to market one year. Elsie is a die-hard plant collector, with recently acquired specimens almost always waiting on deck to be planted or overwintered.

When asked what plant is their favorite, they respond almost in unison: "Whatever is in bloom." **LG**

*Elsewhere in this issue, Minneapolis-based gardener Eric Johnson writes about using rocks in the garden.*

### Ready to Volunteer?

Membership in the various plant societies, including MSHS, is a wonderful way to learn about plants and gardening. Volunteering connects you with fellow gardeners and often comes with fun perks, like free admission to events and discounts on plants and merchandise. A quick online search will connect you with just about any society that interests you. A complete listing of volunteer opportunities with MSHS can be found at [www.northerngardener.org](http://www.northerngardener.org).

—E.J.