

Jean Phillips – A Legacy in The Orangeville & District Horticultural Society

Words that come to mind when thinking about Jean Phillips, a woman of sharp wit, grace, a no-nonsense attitude. Born in Dorset, England in 1937, she grew up during WW2. While living in a rural environment spared her from the harsher parts of the war, she was not a stranger to the frugality that came with the times. While growing up, her family always had a vegetable garden full of potatoes, beans, green peas and lots more.

As an adventurous soul, Jean joined her husband Peter as he migrated to Canada to start his career in the aviation industry. She was only 29 years old when she left England behind to settle in Ontario. She learned very quickly that Ontario was not like England. When she could not garden through the harsh winters, she turned instead to sewing and knitting for her two daughters, Sheila and Hazel. When her daughters joined Girl Guides, Jean did not want to miss out on the fun. She first volunteered as a troop leader and later became a District Commissioner. She provided great leadership for many young women in Orangeville.

In 1982, Jean and Peter moved to Amaranth to a country property, Crosswind. In 1983 they joined the Orangeville & District Horticultural Society. While they transformed the wet and flat land at Crosswind with help from their friends to a veritable summer paradise with bountiful colour and produce to harvest. Her daughter Sheila recounts a favourite memory as: “when Mum’s friend Lois would fly her bright red vintage plane into Crosswind, just to collect some of Mum’s peas fresh picked from the garden!”

As a part of the Horticultural Society, Jean and Peter veritably dug themselves in. They volunteered, shared their plants and made many friends within the Society. Jean was a member of the Board of Directors for 31 years, 20 of which she held Officer Positions. She also held the following Committee positions: Flower Show Committee, Social Committee, Welcoming Committee, Phoning Committee, Program Coordinator and Summer Project Committee. Her Officer Positions included: Treasurer for 10 years, Secretary for 7 years and Second Vice-President for 3 years. Additionally, she was very well known for her floral designs. All of our trophies feature her name countless times. To add to all of these accomplishments, she was also an accredited Flower Show Judge.

Kathy Bouma, previous District 7 Director and still current Board of Directors’ member recounted the Phillips’ influence on her: “It was Jean her husband Peter that asked me to join the District 7 Board and follow in Peter’s footsteps as Treasurer. I think Jean was Secretary at that time too.” She further recounts: “Both Peter and Jean won the OHA Silver Fir medal in different years [...] both are of the highest recognition at the OHA level.”

Even in her later years after Peter’s passing, her daughter, Sheila recounts:

For many years, during the hottest summer days, I remember Mum would walk from her home on C Line to Greenwood Cemetery with a water hose and tools to help care for the garden there. Her frequent walks along an incredibly busy stretch of Broadway terrified me. But ever the dedicated risk taker, Mum would simply say, “I’ll be careful, but the flowers need water!”

When I joined the Society with my family in 2018, we had recently purchased our first house here in Orangeville. Entering my first meeting, the President, Julia Dimakos approached me and asked if I could occasionally fill in for the summer to water a garden bed at Greenwood Cemetery for

Jean. I agreed, and my family and I watered during that summer when Jean was away visiting her grandchildren. Later that year, Jean approached me with, “would you like to get away from your kids one night a month? Why don’t you join the Horticultural Board of Directors.” And so, I did, because Jean always just knew the right way to ask. Shortly after that, I became Archivist, then Instagram and Facebook Manager, then later Secretary, Website Manager, and finally in 2024, President. She is the reason I am here today.

Everyone who knew her at Hort meetings knew to look forward to Jean’s famous lemon squares. You had to be quick, Jean added her own special magic, they vanished nearly immediately.

One of the last memories I have of her in Orangeville was her handing me photos of herself winning one of her countless awards, saying to me, “once I’m gone, no one will want these,” as if she did not think she would be remembered. I have to say, for once, Jean was wrong. We will always remember the profound impact you had on all our lives at the Horticultural Society.

In honour of Jean’s legacy with the Horticultural Society, we have renamed our Scholarship: The Jean Phillips Memorial Scholarship for Studies in Horticulture. Additionally, next year one of our May Flower Show prizes will be named in Jean’s honour.

Jean Phillips died on April 28, 2026. A life spent dedicated to her family, friends and the gardens. A woman with a profound sense of adventure, a desire to teach and legacy that will be long remembered by all who knew her. In the end, it seems fitting that she be laid to rest in Greenwood Cemetery, the place she spent many years tending the colourful flowers she so loved.

Vivian Petho – Archivist & President of The Orangeville & District Horticultural Society