



The Story of Lilla and John Leach

Leach Botanical Garden was the home of Lilla and John Leach from 1936-1972. Lilla was a well-respected botanist and John was a pharmacist and civic leader.

Lilla and John purchased the original 4.17 acre property on Johnson Creek in 1931 for ten dollars and called it "Sleepy Hollow." They built the stone cabin on the south side of the creek in 1932 and enjoyed spending weekends there. When the Manor House was completed in 1936, it became their year-round home, with the garden development beginning in earnest in 1937. John Leach and Wilbert Davies, a student of Landscape Architecture, did most of the landscaping work themselves, including much of the stonework in the original Leach Garden areas.



Lilla Irvin and John Leach met while attending high school at the Forest Grove Academy. Lilla then enrolled at the



University of Oregon, earning her degree in botany in 1908, and John graduated from Oregon Agricultural College (now OSU) in 1907 with a degree in pharmacy. The two were married on September 13, 1913, in an outdoor ceremony on the Pudding River—at thirteen minutes past noon, with thirteen people in the wedding party.

John became the owner of the Phoenix Pharmacy at SE 67th and Foster Road. He was very active in the community and was instrumental in the paving of Foster Road, planning for the Ross Island Bridge, and the building of the Arleta Library. He helped found the SE Chamber of Commerce and was a generous supporter of the YMCA.



John was also an accomplished metal artist who created the Sleepy Hollow sign near the Manor House front door, the Sleepy Hollow weathervane on the gift shop roof, and the fountain on the East Terrace.

BOTANICAL EXPLORATIONS

John courted Lilla by telling her that "he would take her to places no cake-eating botanist would dare to go." He followed through on that promise and they spent many summers botanizing in the Siskiyou Mountains of southwest Oregon as well as in the Willows, Steens, Olympics, and Cascades. Their mules, Pansy and Violet,



Out on the trail with mules Pansy and Violet.

accompanied them on their Siskiyou Mountain excursions. It was during these rugged botanical explorations that Lilla found five plants previously unknown to western science, including *Kalmiopsis leachiana*. The Kalmiopsis Wilderness Area in the Siskiyou Mountains was created to protect the unique habitat where *K. leachiana* grows.



Photo: Gabe Howe

LEACH BOTANICAL GARDEN

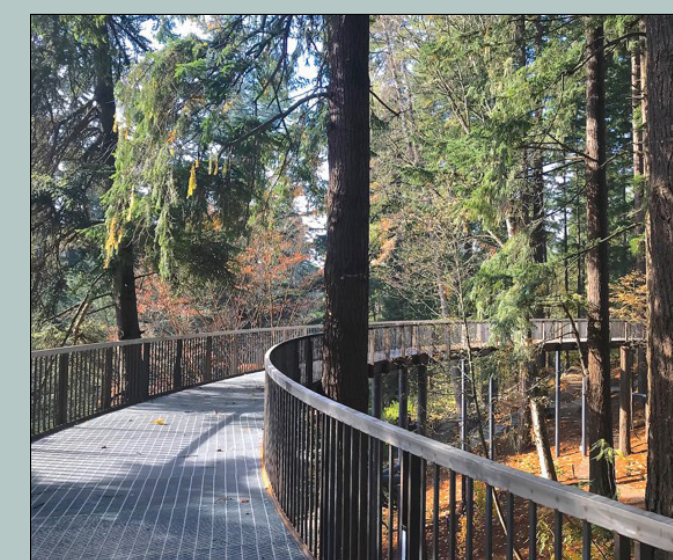


John & Lilla willed their Sleepy Hollow home to the City of Portland with the stipulation that it become a public botanical garden within ten years or ownership would transfer to the YMCA. A group of garden supporters lobbied the city to manage the property as a public botanical park. Their

efforts appeared to be in vain and the transfer to the YMCA was set to take place when **Charles Jordan, the newly appointed Parks Commissioner**, decided to take a look at the garden before signing it away. He called the garden a "little jewel" that should be preserved for the public to enjoy, and a plan was created to manage the Garden with a non-profit partner organization, Leach Garden Friends. **Commissioner Jordan cut the ribbon when** Leach Botanical Garden opened to the public in 1983.



The Friends continue to manage the Garden in partnership with Portland Parks & Recreation. Since then, donors and partners have added approximately 13 acres to the Garden, and in April 2021 the first new major development project opened in the Upper Garden.**



On the easternmost five acres, a habitat enhancement project is underway. The "Back 5 Acres" is an educational program with sociocultural goals designed to engage, educate, and connect people of different cultural backgrounds -- to each other and to the land.

**Funding for the Upper Garden development project came from the City of Portland, Prosper Portland, METRO, and generous donors to the Leach Garden Friends capital campaign.