

The Sarasota Garden Club  
Founders' Circle

By Thomas P. Honsa

In addition to its world-famous beaches and rich cultural heritage, Sarasota is famous for its sub-tropical flora. Orchids, hibiscus and birds of paradise are as familiar to local residents as St. Armand's Circle and Reubens' cartoons. And just as those landmarks owe much to Sarasota's famed connection to the Ringlings, the community's floral prominence also harkens back to the famed Circus family. But neither John nor his brother Charles can take credit for the development. The praise goes to John's wife Mable.

In May of 1927 Mable Ringling hosted at her spectacular new home the first meeting of what would become the Sarasota Garden Club Founders Circle. Thirty people attended the meeting, and they quickly decided to use flowers to beautify storefronts on Main Street. The group was so successful there were soon calls for other "garden circles" around the city. Twelve were eventually formed, with Mable playing an instrumental role in the development of several. The circles federated into the Sarasota Garden club in 1933.

During World War II members developed the land on which the Garden Club now stands as an "honor park" recognizing the sacrifice of the area's servicemen and women. The building on that site has served as home to the organization since 1960. The club owns the building, while the city owns the adjacent property.

Mable Ringling was well known for her gardening prowess. The family museum collection features many vases, pots and centerpieces that held her flowers, especially roses. Mable began her Sarasota rose garden even before Ca d'Zan, the beautiful home she shared with her husband John, was built. It was her major landscaping effort on the grounds, and she was rewarded with several crops of prize-winning flowers. Some of those blooms even decorated the Ringling yacht as it was anchored in Sarasota Bay. Mable Ringling died in 1929 (John maintained the gardens for several years after in her memory). A memorial fountain, since removed, was constructed in her honor just south of downtown Sarasota in 1934. Though the fountain is long gone, the success of Mable Ringling's efforts to beautify the city with flowers and plants is still felt today, and remains a durable monument to her legacy.