

An Exclusive Magazine Serving the Residents of Landfall & Wrightsville Beach

intracoastal *living*

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*Camilla
Herlevich*

**Plants a
Legacy of Land
Preservation**



Best Version Media

Photo by Mark Steelman Photography

The Rehder Boys

BY JULIE REHDER, PHOTOS COURTESY OF BROWNIE HARRIS,
BY STUART R. BORRETT

They were tall, lean men with draws thick as the sorghum once processed in their hometown. Erect and deliberate in their strides, they would bob and weave through spider webs and the thickest long leaf pine forests until emerging in the Carolina sunlight to check on a favorite “honey hole” of carnivorous plants. To them, these were sacred places, the home of Venus’ flytraps, pitcher plants, sundews, and bladderworts. Henry and Stanley Rehder made these trips together, just as their father had done, bending to record new growth. Or to curse the developers or poachers who were destroying the plants they hoped future generations would enjoy.

Henry Rehder, the debonair commercial florist, could fit as easily in country club lounges or fine European gardens as he did in the paper-strewn passenger side of his brother’s well-worn Jeep. Stanley, an outdoorsman who mixed plaids and stripes, was most at ease with a fishing pole, shovel or straight flush in his hands. His story-telling skills kept his listeners fascinated for hours. A decade apart in age, the brothers shared parents but not childhoods. But they found kinship and friendship out among the Carolina Bays, especially late in their lives.

Henry Burbank Rehder, born in 1911, and George Stanley Rehder, born in 1922, were local legends when it came to plants, especially the carnivorous kind. For Henry, the joy centered on their beauty. It was the bare roots and soil that excited Stanley. Growing flowers was in their DNA. Their German grandparents, Henry and Johanna, had settled in Wilmington during the Civil War. To remind herself of her homeland, Johanna planted bulbs in her modest yard, steps away from Oakdale Cemetery’s gate. Passersby, noting the beauty and rarity of Johanna’s flowers, bought them for their loved ones’ graves. Recognizing a business opportunity, Johanna established Mrs. H. Rehder Florist, which would remain part of Wilmington’s landscape for four generations.

Henry and Stanley’s father, Will, joined his mother in the floral business. He received his formal training in Brooklyn before returning home to expand both florist shop and greenhouses. For decades, “Mr. Will” served Wilmington society’s needs for flowers. He was happiest when he took his sons into the woods to find flytraps, pitcher plants and the hearty, shiny smilax he shipped by train to decorate fine hotels up north. He taught his sons to identify game tracks, instilling in Stanley the desire to prove that panthers still roam the Carolina forests.

During World War II, Henry served in the Merchant Marine. Stanley served in the Army’s 66th Infantry Division in France. A middle brother, Billy, flew the “Himalayan Hump” from India to China. Afterward, Henry took the helm at Will Rehder Florist, the retail part of the business. Stanley applied the horticulture skills he learned at NC State College to build the wholesale operation, Rehder’s Greenhouses, seven acres under glass. Stanley grew the chrysanthemums, carnations, poinsettias, lilies and other house plants; Henry made sure

The Stanley Rehder Carnivorous Plant Garden



Brothers Stanley and Henry Rehder. Photo courtesy of Brownie Harris



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every home had a Rehder plant or floral arrangement. Henry's son, Henry Rehder, Jr. kept the retail tradition going after "the Rehder boys" retired, and wrote two books on gardening before becoming a Lutheran pastor.

During their long marriage, Henry Rehder Sr. and his wife, Barbara, created one of the region's most beautiful home gardens. Full of winding pathways with lush specimens of azaleas, camellias and flowering trees, it was open to the public each spring and featured in national and statewide magazines. Their small greenhouse contained exotic tropical plants. Their picture-perfect vegetable garden was a source of both pride and fresh food.

Stanley found his passion in his friend Pete Watkins' Fun City Farms. On that multi-acre tract off Rogersville Road, his poker and fishing buddies grew beans, corn, tomatoes and cukes. Stanley's favorite pastime involved transforming his Jeep with the FLY-TRAP license plate into a mobile farmer's market. He loved to bestow his share of the crops upon friends and pretty receptionists throughout town. Sometimes these visits included fresh fish, especially when "the blues were runnin'" along the beach. A devastating hailstorm and furnace malfunction put an end to the greenhouse business. Stanley changed careers. As a commercial real estate agent, he continued his hunt for plants and panthers while scouting locations for development.

Will Rehder had taught his sons how to recognize places best suited for carnivorous plants, especially bogs where life-sustaining mosses held water even in the hottest summers. In later years these weekend plant detectives documented hundreds of carnivorous plant sites. As their memories began to wane—this was before GPS—the brothers staked small irrigation flags to alert roadside mowers to avoid their beloved plants. Always trusting, Stanley was beyond despair when these flags steered poachers right to the spots where flytraps were most vulnerable. Stanley and Henry befriended homeowners in places like Boiling Spring Lakes, teaching them about the treasures in their yards. They ferried carloads of visitors from across the world to see the plants in the wild. Henry enjoyed cataloging the varieties of native *Sarracenia*—pitcher plants—and once submitted an unusual hybrid he found at a Boy Scout camp. The Smithsonian Institution verified its rarity and, in Henry's honor, named it *Sarracenia rehderi*.

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Photos by Stuart R. Barrett



Stanley Rehder demonstrates the trigger hair mechanisms of the Venus flytrap.

Photo courtesy of Brownie Harris.

For Stanley, the science was not the draw. What appealed to him was the pure uniqueness of the Venus flytrap and his pride that it was indigenous only to southeastern North Carolina. He spent years persuading any willing legislator to stiffen penalties for poaching and declare the plants an endangered species. He routinely called the newspaper to suggest stories about the plants and expose poachers. He experimented with collecting flytrap and Sarracenia seeds. In the 1970s, he started The Flytrap Company both to supplement his income and repopulate sites that had lost plants. His goal was encouraging people to grow the plants rather than poach them. He harvested seed pods, dried them in brown paper bags in his attic, and separated seeds from pods by gently rolling them through a screen. He then measured them into carefully marked vials holding hundreds of seeds smaller than poppy seeds. Stanley carried a video camera on most outings and kept notes on his discoveries in worn composition books.

His quest to make southeastern North Carolina known for its unique plant life attracted national attention in the 1970s and 80s. He pitched stories about plants that eat bugs to network TV shows. *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, and *That's Incredible* flew him to their studios to show off his traps and pitchers. One of his most-told tales was eliciting a shriek from Barbara Walters when he pulled out the live palmetto bugs he'd brought to feed his plants.

In the 1970s, scouting land for development, Stanley discovered a boggy site in the center of town. He found flytraps and pitcher plants and saw the opportunity to scatter seeds to create a unique preserve. It became a showplace for visitors and a living laboratory for children at nearby Alderman Elementary School. With permission from the owners, the MacRae family, Stanley and Henry gathered and sowed seeds for more than two decades, kept the site trimmed and clean and even set up a box of brochures to help visitors learn about the rare plants.

Queen Ann's Lace by Susan Nuttall

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Representative Ted Davis, pictured with Camilla Herlevich, was instrumental in strengthening laws protecting Venus' flytraps.



Julie Rehder enjoying a moment with her late father, Stanley.

Henry's death in 2004 focused Stanley's love on the place the brothers had shared. Realizing that Stanley's days were also limited, the Coastal Land Trust took the initiative to carry on his work. Camilla Herlevich, its executive director, worked with the MacRaes and the City of Wilmington to create an easement protecting the property. This collaboration was completed in April 2012. The city named the site the Stanley Rehder Carnivorous Plant Garden. This event launched the annual Flytrap Frolic, an event the Coastal Land Trust uses to raise funds and awareness about carnivorous plant habitat. The city's Parks Department maintains the garden. It features plant identification signs, accessible parking, trails, and elevated overlooks. Stanley Rehder was able to attend the naming ceremony, just six months before his death at 90. His handiwork is still visible; the plants follow a distinctive curve where he scattered the seeds along walkways he built.

Tragically, with a few weeks after the garden opened, poachers stole an estimated 900 Venus' flytraps, about 90 percent of the mature plants. This led to greater security and surveillance as well as stiffer penalties for poaching and endangered status for the plants. The silver lining was an outpouring of support from volunteers who replanted the garden and heightened community interest in protecting it. The city's stewardship, the owners' generosity and the NC Coastal Land Trust's leadership have been critical parts of the preservation puzzle. Today the garden thrives again. Take a walk there any time of the year, but especially during the peak growing season, April through July. See for yourself how two brothers made their passion a community treasure. ~

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