

Obituaries

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LESLIE LAKING, 95 ADMINISTRATOR, TEACHER, PLANT SPECIALIST

Visionary horticulturist tended the Royal Botanical Gardens for decades

He saw it as a centre for learning and preservation, as well as a place to appreciate nature

NOREEN SHANAHAN

An ecological jewel at the western tip of Lake Ontario, the Royal Botanical Gardens is an 1,100-hectare site situated between Niagara Falls and Toronto in Burlington, Ont. It is a highly praised tourist mecca, wedding-photo backdrop and a great deal more.

For this there is to thank Leslie Laking, whose steady horticultural and administrative hand guided its development for 65 years.

During his tenure as director, Laking introduced visitors to the delicate taste of freshly tapped maple syrup, to the phenomenon of guided nature trail walks with interpretive posters, and to the lovely hydrangea, which caught on in the gardens of many Ontario homes.



His careful attention to the Katie Osborne Lilac Collection led to the RBG establishing one of the world's largest collections of rare and endangered lilac species.

In his trademark specs, with his half-grin and always-erect posture, Laking was a fashionable gentleman devoted to beauty and vision.

"Royal Botanical Gardens puts nature's beauty on display, but it isn't a park system," he wrote, early in his career. "It teaches, but it isn't a school. It protects and preserves forest and marsh, but it isn't a conservation authority.

"It collects and propagates botanical knowledge and plant life, but it is not a library, museum, or laboratory. It is all those things and more than their sum."

Laking died on April 16, in Burlington of natural causes at the age of 95.

He was born on Sept. 22, 1916, in Freulton, Ont., to Ada and Alfred Laking, who operated a local feed mill. Early on, his chores included growing vegetables for the family table and meticulously pruning flowerbeds. With spade in hand, he began to shape his future.

The landscape that became the Royal Botanical Gardens captured Leslie's attention when he was but 12. He and his family watched as the Rock Gardens, built from abandoned gravel pits, replaced a blight of billboards, gas stations, tarpaper shacks and tumbledown sheds along the road to the city of Hamilton.

After graduating from Hamilton Central Collegiate Institute, Laking studied horticulture at the Ontario Agricultural College, which later became the University of Guelph, graduating with a bachelor's degree in ornamental horticulture.

In 1939, he worked as an exchange student at the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens in Surrey, England.

While there he fell in love with fellow horticultural student Barbara Tarver. The two young people roomed at the same



Leslie Laking, left, is seen in the Rhododendron Collection at Royal Botanical Gardens in the early 1960s. ARCHIVES OF ROYAL BOTANICAL GARDENS



In 1960, Laking, left, had great plans for lilacs in the Arboretum. Right: He inspects his work later that decade. The RBG now has one of the largest collections of named cultivars of lilacs in the world. ARCHIVES OF ROYAL BOTANICAL GARDENS

boardinghouse and sheltered beneath their landlady's piano during air raids.

As his bride, Barbara would later joined him at the RBG. While he was the only one on the payroll, the couple would be known as highly respected "two-for-the-price-of-one" horticulturists.

Laking returned to Canada in 1942 to study botany at the University of Toronto, but his plans were interrupted by war. In 1943, he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force and worked as a meteorologist for two years. When he returned to civilian life, he took a temporary job as a soils specialist for the Province of Ontario Conservation Branch.

From 1946 onward, he only had eyes for the Royal Botanical Gardens, where he was hired as a horticulturist and assistant director.

He retired 35 years later as its longest-running director.

In 2006, he authored *Love Sweat and Soil: A History of Royal Botanical Gardens from 1930 to 1981*. The launch for this book, held with great fanfare in the gardens, took place a few months before his 90th birthday.

From the beginning, Laking wished to model the RBG after famous European gardens. The ground for this was actually laid

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**Marie Minaker
Archivist**

before his time, with its naming. In 1930, King George V permitted the single but significant word "Royal" to be used in its moniker, prompting the Hamilton Herald to write: "It is only the beginning and foundation of what may some day rival Kew Gardens of the Motherland."

"[Laking] decided that the Royal Botanical Gardens was going to be more than just a walled botanical garden," said archivist Marie Minaker, who worked closely with him. "It was going to cover conservation, science, and education."

Indeed, he instituted events around a particularly Canadian enjoyment: maple syrup.

"In March, 1963, throngs trudged through ice and mud across the windswept plain toward the escarpment trail," Laking wrote.

"The process was explained, children sampled the half-rendered sap and returned joyfully to their respective cars strung along Rock Chapel Road for most of a mile."

There was even a "Maple Queen" crowned each year to great fanfare.

Among Laking's contributions to the RBG was the establishment of other educational programs

for children and the popular Children's Garden. In 1954, he and Barbara inspected the successful children's projects offered at the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens in New York, and their aspirations soared.

Before long, children in Burlington were learning how to thin seedlings, weed flower beds and cultivate all sorts of plants. Fruits of their efforts quickly shot up from rich soil and the children were thrilled.

Later in his tenure, Laking oversaw the development of a similar kind of education outreach program. Therapy Through Horticulture was a hands-on program enjoyed by hospital patients seeking encouragement to heal.

Tiny potted plants were lined up on dreary institutional window ledges. The RBG trained occupational therapists and through successful fundraising efforts was able to purchase a mobile therapy unit.

A fully customized RV modified for growing and transporting plants and tools took to the road.

The RBG also built up an extensive collection of historic horticultural catalogues, believed to be the largest in Canada. Nearly 10,000 individual catalogues from Canadian nurseries, going

back as far as 1827, were gathered and preserved for posterity, an important resource for historians and researchers.

"[Laking] was an Old World gentleman," said Minaker. "He had a good sense of humour, but he was certainly no belly laugh."

She tells a story about sharing a table with him years ago at an auxiliary plant sale. On her side of the table were tall grasses. On his side, perennial flowers.

"He loved flowers, but wasn't all that fond of grasses," she said. "He kept moving them away, and I said, 'Now you be careful - if you don't move them faster, they're going to start breeding!'"

Laking was named to the Order of Canada in 1979. After retiring in 1981, he became director emeritus of the RBG. He received an honorary doctorate from McMaster, where he had taught botany part time for 30 years, and also from the University of Guelph.

In 1998, he was inducted into the Hamilton Gallery of Distinction.

He leaves his daughter June, his son Ronald and grandchildren Kelsey, Danica, Yolande, Nicole and Lauren. He also leaves his "other son" Chris Demerino. Laking was predeceased by his wife, Barbara.