





# APRIL Showers Bring RAY'S Flowers

BY BETH SAULNIER

COMMENCEMENT'S  
KING OF THE  
BLOSSOMS  
CELEBRATES HIS  
FIFTY-YEAR REIGN

Ray Fox's garden is a mess. It's mid-May, and the retired floriculture professor has been back from his winter home in North Carolina for two weeks. But though gardening is his passion, Fox has barely started unwrapping the bushes he covered in plastic last fall to keep the deer away. Elegant magnolia trees have miniskirts of scraggly undergrowth, and the empty ornamental pond is crisscrossed with cracks. "I've got to clean this all out," Fox says with an embarrassed grin. "But I just haven't had the time."





Hakanson, in a floriculture class. While Ray's floral savvy might have charmed another girl, Vera had her own ideas about flower arrangement. "I'd make her a corsage, and she'd take it apart and redo it the way she wanted," he says. "It got to the point where I'd just give her the flowers and say, 'Here, you make it.'"

They graduated in 1947 and became instructors in the department, marrying in 1951. (When he completed his PhD in 1956 and became a professor, nepotism rules forced her to resign.) Sabbatical trips took them to Europe and Asia to study flower arrangement, and to the posh floral

Most of the year, Fox can garden to his heart's content. He retired in 1987, after earning bachelor's and doctoral degrees on the Hill and teaching here for four decades. But each spring, Fox belongs to Cornell again. Every year since his graduation in 1947, Fox has coordinated the flowers for commencement—a job that calls for months of planning culminating in a week-long floral assault. Fox's golden anniversary hasn't gone unnoticed: President Hunter Rawlings thanked the emeritus professor in his commencement speech, and the event's organizing committee gave him a glass rose. "His heart and soul go into making sure everything is right," says Connie Mabry, the commencement coordinator. "He wants it to look beautiful."

Graduates may not be able to count on clear skies or a decent dinner reservation on commencement weekend, but they can trust Ray Fox to concoct a little bit of paradise. Starting the previous Wednesday, Fox and his team of volunteers hole up in the Kenneth Post Greenhouses on Tower Road, where they trim 5,000 red carnations for graduates and craft hundreds of white carnation boutonnieres for ushers. "My wife says she's a garden widow," Fox says. "I tell her, at least she knows where I am."

With longtime helper John Kumpf, Fox makes the dramatic five-foot-tall arrangements that grace such events as the president's breakfast on the Arts Quad, convocation in Barton Hall, the baccalaureate ceremony in Bailey, and

the commencement stage itself. "Every flower is different. You have to use them the way they grow," Fox says, weaving a stem of white pompom chrysanthemums amid the roses, gladioli, baby's breath, and ferns. "It's like a woman getting dressed up. Some people know how, and some people don't."

The final product will be four fifty-pound bouquets, each containing more than 100 flowers, that could add up to \$1,600 in a florist shop. (Commencement's floral budget is about \$8,000, which includes not only the cut flowers but the hundreds of decorative geraniums and red-leafed "Cornell coleus" plants grown in campus greenhouses.) Since the arrangements are used several times over the weekend, they're guarded constantly to prevent pilfering; Fox has even been known to snatch flowers back from the hands of startled graduates. "People are used to going to a party and taking the flowers afterwards," Fox says. "They have the idea they can do the same thing here."

Fox acquired his green thumb early, gardening around the house with his father in nearby Corning. He came to Cornell to study floriculture and ornamental horticulture in 1940, but left to join the army two and a half years later. His drafting experience from studying landscaping landed him a post as a phototopographic engineer; stationed in Melbourne and Manila, he helped edit maps of the Pacific theater from New Guinea to Japan.

He came back to Cornell in 1946 and promptly met his future wife, Vera





shops of Park Avenue to study retailing. Fox took students down to Manhattan to mount the annual Macy's flower show and to Lake Placid to decorate the Olympic arena for the 1980 games; as part of a team of volunteer florists, he did massive arrangements of long-stemmed red roses for a Reagan inaugural.

But throughout his career, Fox always did his commencement duty. "I'm not a wealthy man," Fox says. "I can't donate a million dollars, but this is something I can do for Cornell." He's only missed the event itself twice, when he and Vera were out of the country, but still did the planning and design. "His enthusi-

asm is without equal," says Kumpf, recalling a time when Fox nearly mowed down a student parking attendant who tried to keep him from delivering the flowers to Schoellkopf. "It's always been fun and interesting, to say the least."

This year's ceremony went off without a major floral hitch—although a shortage of carnations made Fox switch to red roses for the 1,300 master's and doctoral candidates who participated. (The 3,700 bachelor's degree marchers still got carnations.) His fiftieth commencement over, Fox can finally follow Candide's advice and cultivate his own garden.

"I hope this is going to be the last

time," Vera says, sitting in their living room on Ellis Hollow Road and sounding as if she doesn't really mind all that much. "Fifty years is enough."

Ray smiles back at her. "Oh, no it's not," he says.

He's already thinking about trying to salvage some of the flower arrangements for the couple's fiftieth class reunion, just a few weeks away. And though he and Vera are tempted to stay south year-round, there's a boxwood bush in their Ithaca backyard he's spent thirty years pruning into a peacock. "There's an old saying," he says. "Once you hold a flower in your hand, you never let it go."



Just after dawn on commencement day, Fox directs two young helpers at Schoellkopf Field (above left). Later, he puts the finishing touches on the geraniums and coleus in front of the stage.