

# 'Green Thumb' HQ Is Taking Shape Here

By Lillian McLaughlin

The rustic little building at 5560 Merle Hay road, just 30 feet square, looks a little lost in its two-acre location, bleak now from the 1968-69 barrage of ice and snow.

But watch it, Des Moines!

It's the new national headquarters of the largest men's horticultural organization in the world, with some 10,000 spade-and-trowel-wielding members in 48 states, and seven foreign countries.

It's the home of the Men's Garden Clubs of America, with 250 clubs affiliated, and the next to the oldest of these in M.G.C.A.'s 37-year history is the Men's Garden Club of Des Moines.

In April, professional Des Moines landscapers who are members will move in with hundreds of plantings—shade trees, flowering shrubs, evergreens—and create the garden spot setting the world expects from some 20,000 green thumbs.

By the summer of 1970, when the national M.G.C.A. convention meets in Des Moines, the landscape plan on the office wall, with a pool and fountain, sun court and meadow, should be a blooming reality.

Headquarters for M.G.C.A. for many years was run from the home of the aptly named, long-time executive secretary, George A. Spader, former chief horticulturist at the New York State University Agricultural and Technical Institute at Morrisville, who now is retired.

## Headquarters To Grow, Too

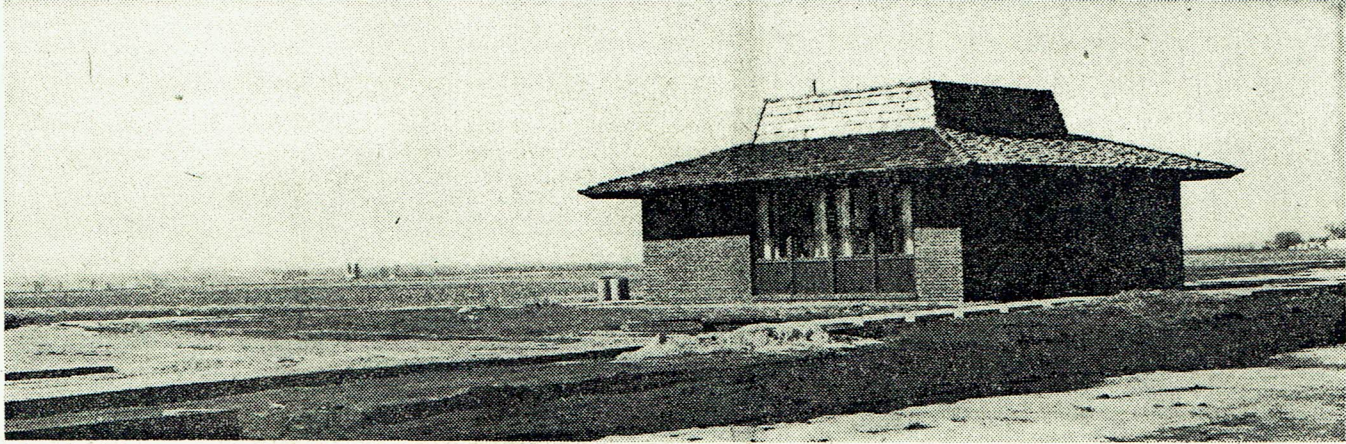
Its relocation is one of several signs of the new thrust that has been building up in the organization for the past year. Sights are set for more members in the 20-to-50-year age bracket, especially young homeowners, and a program is already under way to attract and serve such a membership.

The new M.G.C.A. executive director, Guy Chichester, 29, another part of the new youth image, confidently predicts 275 clubs and a total of 12,500 members by the end of 1969.

Headquarters, constructed on land given by Pioneer Hi-Bred Corn Co., its neighbor to the west, is designed to grow, too. Eventually three more buildings, similar to the central one, will be spotted on the two acres.

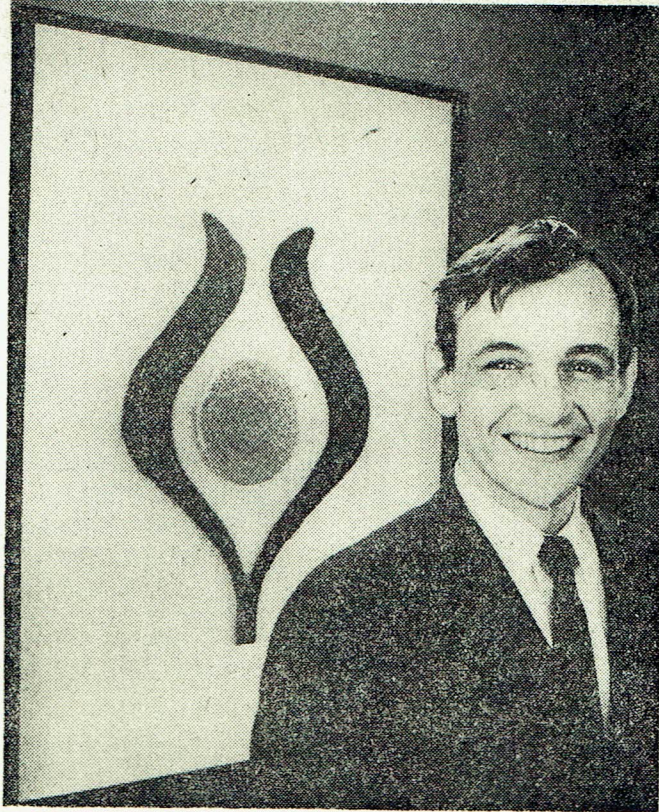
The "enthusiasm of Iowans in general" was a factor in Des Moines' successful bid for the headquarters, Chichester says. Pioneer's gift of a site was followed by pledges to raise funds in the business and civic community for construction of the buildings. Local affiliates already have raised \$25,000, are pushing toward a \$40,000 goal.

In its drive for expanded



This is the new national headquarters of the Men's Garden Clubs of America at 5560 Merle Hay road. The two acres

surrounding the building now are bleak and barren, but in April planting to beautify the grounds will begin.



The young executive director of the Men's Garden Clubs of America, Guy Chichester, 29, stands before club's new green and gold symbol—stylized leaves and sun. A framed crewel embroidery, it is work of Valeria Griffith of Des Moines and was a winner in competition at the University of Bridgeport (Conn.) School of Industrial Design.

membership the organization has made its first significant gains in Iowa, Chichester says.

"The number of new clubs in Iowa is very unusual," he explained. "There are clubs now in Urbandale, Indianola, Waterloo, Des Moines, including a Polk County group. Since Jan. 1, clubs also have started in Keokuk, Waverly and Marshalltown. Prospects are good for clubs in Storm Lake and Newton," says Chichester.

Historically, Des Moines is a proper home for M.G.C.A.

## A Chicagoan And Ding

The once all-female field of garden clubs was invaded nearly four decades ago because of the daring, or presumption, of one man, Leo W. Nack, a Chicago utilities company engineer. In the late '20's, Nack read of a news-

paper home garden competition pitched to the girls. He entered, won the top \$1,000 prize.

Nack then rounded up 16 pioneers, and the first men's garden club in the country was organized in February, 1928.

Two years later, another brave band of dirt-diggers rallied around the late Jay N. (Ding) Darling, Iowa's great conservationist-cartoonist, and organized the second club in the nation.

In September, 1932, the two male outposts in a female territory hooked thumbs to form a national organization.

The men's clubs now coexist amiably with the ladies' clubs, co-operate in promoting conservation, roadside improvements and other projects, Chichester says.

The organization since its beginning has been made up of men in all professions, all economic brackets—generals, admirals, college professors,



Old symbol is still cherished by organization. A large woodcarving of its vigorous flower-grower (sunflowers?) hangs on reception room wall in new headquarters here, as does the new "leaves and sun" symbol. It is carried on stationery as an embossed seal, along with new symbol in color.

engineers, salesmen, ministers, clerks, firemen, editors, policemen, even farmers, as well as professional horticulturists.

## 'Beauty' Projects

Community beautification has always been a concern of many men's garden clubs. Under the new regime it is a prime consideration.

Chichester recently fired off letters to governors of 50 states asking where Men's Garden Clubs could help, has received answers from all.

Seventy-five per cent of the association's member-club, Chichester estimates, are involved in some kind of community beautification, from developing arboretums to planting petunias in boxes on a county fairgrounds.

On the basis of its scientific and educational purposes, M.G.C.A. is non-profit, tax-exempt.

An important function, therefore, is its testing program, in which new vegetables, flowers, shrubs, trees,

are fielded out to knowledgeable members for growing, observation and reporting.

It conducts a training program to qualify judges for horticulture shows, has inaugurated a lively newsletter, publishes pamphlets on aids for program chairmen, sponsors tours.

With an eye on the kids, it also sponsors annually a Big Pumpkin and Giant Sunflower contest (the latter, Chichester hurries to add, not the "Noxious kind" that offends some Iowa legislators, but the great flower beloved of Kansas and birds).

The M.G.C.A. also seems to be lining up behind U.S. Senator Everett Dirksen (Rep., Ill.) in his mellifluous sponsorship of the marigold as a national flower.

In the November-December issue of the M.G.C.A. official publication, The Gardener, a questionnaire was presented members, seeking an opinion on a national flower selection.

"Seventy-five per cent of our members," says Chichester, a marigold-man himself, "are pro-marigold."