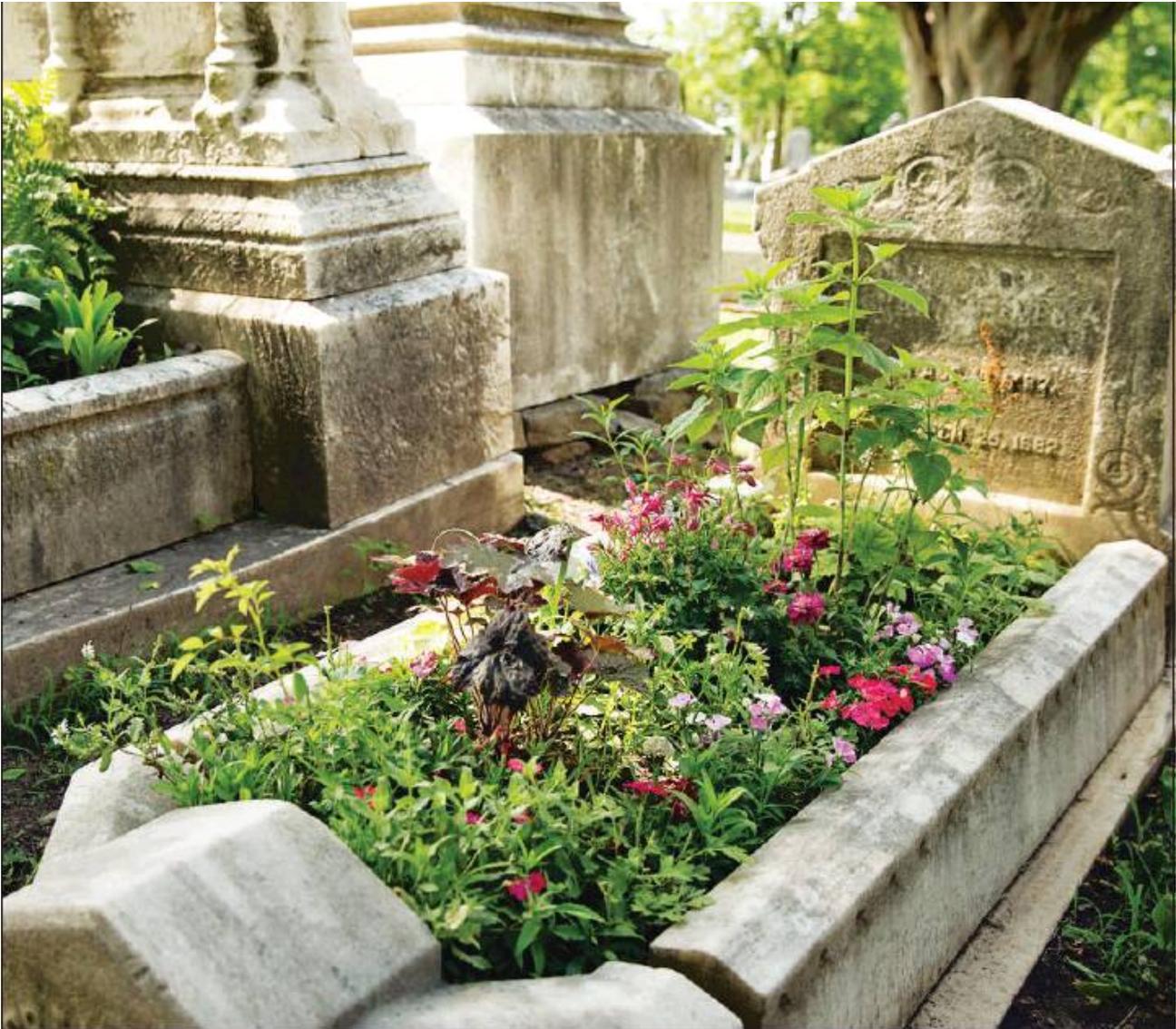


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## Dig it! How to be a grave gardener

**Woodlands Cemetery volunteers connect history and horticulture.**

*By Molly Eichel STAFF WRITER*



A gravesite is adorned with plants at Woodlands Cemetery in West Philadelphia. Volunteers are given grave assignments and lists of plants that would have been on the grounds when the person was alive. RYAN COLLARD

Grave gardeners.

The phrase sounds creepy, doesn't it? But it's also intriguing, and alluring, simultaneously encompassing the macabre and the quaint. The title has been bestowed upon the 70 volunteers who worked last summer at West Philadelphia's Woodlands Cemetery to beautify the (permanent) homes



Volunteers work on a grave in the cemetery. In addition to the plants, a community also has cropped up among grave gardeners. They bring baked goods to share on planting days and offer tips to each other.

of those laid to rest in the 19th-century burial place. "It has added so much beauty to the site," said Jessica Baumert, executive director of the Woodlands Cemetery, "and it's made a noticeable difference on the grounds."

But a funny little community, Baumert said, has cropped up with the plants and flowers growing on the graves at the Woodlands. Grave gardeners bring baked goods to share on planting days and share tips with each other over gardening issues. "All these people are like-minded because this is a strange activity," she said.

The Woodlands have opened up the application process for the second time. To apply, go to [woodlandspg.org/gravegardeners](http://woodlandspg.org/gravegardeners). Applications for the 2017 season close next Friday.

### **How does it work?**

Each volunteer is given a grave assignment and a list of plants that would have been on the grounds when the person was alive (think snapdragons and lady ferns). These plants are gathered through historical resources around the area.

"Lots of people started doing research on the person" in their allotted grave, said Baumert, a self-described history nerd. "It became more than we even expected it to be. These were people buried in the 19th century that have no one left to visit with them. It's a great way to connect people with the past through gardening."

The gardeners for the grave of Dr. David Jayne got so excited about their grave's occupant that they worked with medicinal plants to spruce it up. At the grave gardeners' end-of-the-summer fete, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia did a workshop about medicinal plants at Jayne's grave.

### **Do you need to be an experienced gardener?**

Volunteers included old pros and those new to gardening. Baumert said the benefit of going into the second year of grave gardening was that last year's volunteers could give a helping hand to this year's rookies. There's also some education involved. "We have three workshops," Baumert said, "before anyone gets their hands dirty."

You're not even expected to bring your plants and flowers, although many people supplemented what the Woodlands provided.

### **Be ready for a commitment**

Workshops start in February. "The first day, people get their graves ready, and do soil amendment in March. Then this season basically goes through the end of October, when we did bulb planting for the next year," Baumert said. "Last year, we did a survey of all the gardeners, and they said it was about a two-to-four-hour week time commitment." Going on vacation and can't make a week? Don't worry, the community will fill in for you. But in you apply, keep in mind you've got a full season of grave gardening ahead of you.

### **Can't grave garden, but still want to help?**

The Woodlands is run by a small staff, so donations are always welcome (go to the website to give). Baumert said she wanted to start grave tours this summer and would hold another grave-gardening fete come September. The Woodlands are open 365 days a year, from dusk to dawn, so even if you aren't planting, you can still enjoy the view. [eichelm@phillynews.com](mailto:eichelm@phillynews.com)

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