

At 83, She Helps Nature To Improve Wild Plants

By Patricia Spollen
Garden Editor

BEFORE most of us get lost in the seed and nursery catalogues in our annual hunt for new plants, it's a good idea to go visiting Elizabeth White.

Miss White is now 83, and considers herself retired from the blueberry business that made her name in gardening and farming fame. But from her home that looks out on the cranberry bogs in Whitesbog, N. J., she still carries on her hobby and greatest interest, which she says is "making people appreciate the wild plants of this part of the country."

She herself did a lot more than just sit around appreciating them. Elizabeth White is credited with practically inventing the cultivated blueberries that are now a multi-million dollar crop in New Jersey, and it began when she decided that there were big possibilities in the little wild huckleberry.

She started, back in 1911, to collect the best plants in the woods and fields around her. Her father's cranberry pickers already knew where some of the biggest and sweetest - flavored huckleberries grew, and they got in on the hunt. Now familiar varieties of cultivated blueberries—Rubel, Harding, Adams—recall the names of cranberry pickers who brought in the best wildlings in contests that Miss White kept going for years.

From there on, it was a job of constant selecting and discarding, and saving of the finest offspring, year after year, until gradually the huckleberry was a much bigger and better baby than it had been.

Miss White says the idea of developing native huckleberries didn't originate with her. She grew up surrounded by them in New Lisbon, N. J., noticed many things about the differences in their quality, collected such printed information as could be found. But it was a United States Department of Agriculture booklet, "Experiments With Blueberry Culture," that confirmed ideas she already had about their possibilities and got her excited enough to get to work on them.

AS of two years ago, she has passed all her blueberry developing into other hands, but she's off on another enthusiasm—native holly. Actually, she began with holly at about the same time as huckleberries, but now she's really getting down to concentrating on it.

"It was originally very abundant from Cape Cod to Northern Florida," she says, "and there were millions of hollies in hardwood forests." Her object is not just to save the beautiful plants now left in the wild, but to select good specimens and improve them in cultivation.

It's a serious business, though, to develop good hollies, and Miss White says that there still isn't very much holly grown in cultivation in the country as a whole. Finding "a combination of nice qualities," with good leaf color and thickness, freedom from disease and a good habit of growth, takes time. She isn't collecting very much any more, but working with what she has.

Miss White has found, though,

that they grow more rapidly than we had thought, or at least some of them do. She has had plants make little growth their first two or three years, and then jump anywhere from one to four feet in a season. The next summer, the same plant would add about 18 inches. After that, top growth might be unimpressive but side branches would start to fill out.

Not so lost in native plants that she ignores all the others, Elizabeth White also has propagated English and Japanese and other hollies along with the American *Ilex opaca*. It isn't a matter of scorning all the exotic material to be found in nursery catalogues, and she wouldn't have backyard gardeners neglect beautiful imports, but she wants everyone to admire and grow, and if possible help to improve stock of the beautiful wildlings that grow here.

Some of the best—dogwood and hemlock, native azaleas and rhododendron, asters and phlox—are already widely grown and much appreciated by many gardeners. But other natives are less often seen, and there are so many good ones that the list could go on for pages.

AT garden planning season, deciding what plants to grow often boils down to kinds that suit particular purposes. If the sun and shade question, for instance, comes up, then there's a wealth of native materials.

Comparatively few small flowering plants in the general catalogues give much bloom in anything from light to deep shade, but the lists from dealers in native plants suggest everything from the arbutus, violets, forget-me-nots and a host of others that bloom in the spring to the bright bergamot and wild bleeding hearts of summer to the asters and liatris of fall.

In shrubs, anyone can find plenty of spring bloom among the widely grown forsythias and lilacs and such of spring, but if summer shrub flowers are wanted we have to go to neglected but worthy natives. The pyramid-shaped white blooms of meadowsweet, the sweet-scented pinkish white spikes of pepperbush, and shrubby wild roses are just beginning to be added to gardens.

Native clematis and bittersweet hold their own among all the other vines, and native trees have fared pretty well, too. But the wild fringe tree, for one, deserves wider planting than it gets. It's as beautiful a small spring-flowering tree, when it's masses of white bloom appear in May, as any cultivated laburnum or magnolia.

One of the best uses of native plants, but something that's easily forgotten at spring planting time, is as sources of brilliant fall color. Native viburnums, with white flowers somewhat like hydrangeas in summer, are vivid red in fall. Shrubby native dogwoods, though not as conspicuous in bloom as the most familiar *Cornus florida*, have handsome fall foliage. And even the huckleberry is beginning to come into its own as an ornamental, not just a food, plant. It would be worth planting among other shrubs for its red fall color alone.



HOLLY IS THE MAIN INTEREST now of Elizabeth White, of Whitesbog, N. J., the 83-year-old lady who helped turn little wild huckleberries into big cultivated blueberries. She wants gardeners to plant more native plants.

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