1912

History of the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden

Winter 1911/1912

Eloise, for the first time, spent the winter months on the east coast at Malden Mass. visiting her relatives and sourcing plants for shipment to Minneapolis during the growing season. This would be her custom following her retirement from teaching in 1911.

She wrote an article for the *Minnesota Horticulturalist* on the cultivation of native ornamental plants. In past writings she had expressed her opinions on the use of native plants in the home landscape and wrote about the tendency of home owners to copy what other home owners had done. This article was sort of a summary of past opinions. A sample:

“Avoid, above all, imported plants of unusual color, like the copper beech and the weeping trees, or plants trimmed into formal or fantastic shapes. In general, native species should be used, for plants torn from their natural setting may strike a false note in the landscape. There are many plants just as effective as the cultivated canna, castor bean, crimson rambler, fall hydrangea, golden glow, admirable in themselves, that now pall upon the taste by reason of monotonous reiteration.” (Note 1)

One can see how this particular opinion came directly from an article published the year before in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* in which she wrote:

“Why, for instance, because a neighbor has a beautiful plant on his premises should every one in the vicinity straightway fill his grounds with the same in monotonous reiteration? Among the
hosts of ornamental plants may not something else be selected besides hydrangea, scarlet rambler, canna and golden glow to prevent satiety? If a plant is ‘all the rage.’ it is the very best reason why one should fall out of line and imitate nature in her endless variety.” (Note 2).

**In the climate department** one looks back on the prior year, 1911, the wettest year in local weather history until 2016, which was preceded in 1910 by the driest year in local weather history, and wonders what the new year will bring. There were enough snowfalls to keep a snow cover on the ground from late December 1911 through mid February 1912. After that there were few snowfalls on any significance and there was no snow cover after mid-March. The cold however was another aspect - a number of days in January with lows below -30 degrees F. A weather record still standing in 2019 is the consecutive 7 day period from January 1 through January 7 when the daytime high temperature was always below zero degrees F.

**Spring 1912**

**Botanical classification:** Over the years Botanists have reclassified many plants from the classifications in use at the time Eloise Butler wrote her Garden Log or when Martha Crone prepared her census. I have retained the nomenclature that Eloise Butler or Martha Crone used and then provided the more current classification as used by the major listings in use today, particularly *Flora of North America*, and the *Checklist of the Vascular Flora of Minnesota*.

**This would be an extensive year** for plantings in the Garden as Eloise Butler attempted to bring on-site species she believed should have representation in a “Wild Botanic Garden” as the Garden premises were then referred to.

She imported plants during the spring from Malden MA, Gillett’s Nursery in Southwick MA, from Horsford’s Nursery in Charlotte, VA, from Kelsey’s Nursery in Boxford MA and from a source in New York. The east coast plants supplemented the plants she could obtain from local sources during the Minnesota growing season.

Her Garden Log notes 32 species planted in the spring that were not noted prior to 1912. (Complete list in separate file.) All were from east coast nurseries. One of the plants is shown at right. Fifteen of those were native to Minnesota and only four of the species are present in the Garden today.

The spring weather allowed Eloise to begin the 1912 Garden plantings on April 4th with some plants received from Malden, MA, which included a root of Climbing Poison Ivy, by which we assume she meant the common eastern poison ivy, *Toxicodendron radicans*, which can climb. This is not the species present in the Garden today. Present today is a non-climbing species, Western Poison Ivy, *Toxicodendron rydbergii*.

On that same day she noted that “Monarch treated surgically today.” She had dead limbs removed and the decaying trunk reinforced. Monarch was an aged white oak that lasted until 1940.
On April 18, six members of the Woman’s Club visited the Garden on a day when Eloise reported “Rue anemones galore in bloom.”

After the cold days of January and late winter, once the spring equinox was past the temperatures became more normal for the season and there was adequate rainfall.

**Summer 1912**

**Eloise Butler’s Garden Log** usually has a few notes not related to planting and a curious one on August 21 contained this statement:

“Turtlehead, purple prairie clover, Canadian burnet, double golden glow in bloom! Found large puffball weighing 3 lbs. 4 1/2 oz. by west brookside. Fell into brook!”

The weather in the summer of 1912 provided temperatures in the average range for the time period and frequent summer rains, but not to the extent of the extremely wet prior year of 1911. Planting work during the summer occupied much of her time. On June 25 Eloise noted finding two *Liparis liliifolia* (Large Twayblade) in a prickly ash thicket and a month later “discovered *Lythrum alatum!* [Winged Loosestrife] in east meadow near swamp.” [photo at right]

During the summer months Eloise would obtain her plant material from local sources unlike her 1912 spring plantings which all came from out of state sources. As a result all the summer plantings were species native to the state.

Her Garden Log notes 29 species planted that summer that were not noted prior to 1912. (Complete list in separate file.) Only four of the species are present in the Garden today.

A successful struggle with one non-native plant was worthy of being noted in her annual report:

"The greatest triumph of all, because it has been a failure under assiduous cultivation ever since the Garden was started was a vigorous colony of Deer Grass, *Rhexia virginica*, in bloom for fully a month. It has blossoms of an unusual shade of red, garnished by bright yellow twisted stamens, succeeded by little exquisitely fashioned urn-shaped fruits." (note 3)

She had originally planted it on September 4, 1909 with plants shipped in from Winter Pond MA and noted it was in bloom on August 11 this year. The plant is also called Handsome Harry (photo next page).
In September Eloise Butler maintained an exhibit of the Wild Garden at the Minnesota State Fair, in the Horticulture building as she had since 1909.

On September 9th she reported clearing out the Hermit’s Cave and on the 22nd and 26th reported planting hepatica, maidenhair and wild ginger, asters, Liatris, stiff coreopsis, and downy gentian there. She went back again in October with more plants.

The hermit was known as “Old Andrew” and the “cave-like shelter” is where he supposedly had lived. Eloise would sometimes hear ghostly wood chopping sounds from that area. The area of this cave, north and west of the original Garden area, was added to the Garden in 1912 - and would today be just outside the west boundary fence. This addition added a number of acres to the official Wild Botanic Garden. At the time it was viewed as about 20 acres, but only the original 3 acres were fenced so the boundary of the Garden was somewhat variable until the time of the 1924 fence but that 1924 fence only surrounded what Eloise considered to be the most precious parts of the area and those most subject to vandalism.

On Oct. 10 she notes conducting a wedding party through the Garden (the Ellisons). The weather in October was so nice that Eloise mentioned it in her log on October 28: “Beautiful warm weather all through the month. Cut out prickly ask and sumach (sic) for several days.” She did not believe in using chemicals for treatment and thus it was manual labor. Her policy of letting everything grow without interference had its limits when pesky plants would tend to crowd out more desirables.

She was able to work until November 13. Her last entry for 1912 is on Nov. 13 when she planted specimens received from Mr. Chase of Boulder Colorado:

- Cork elms,
- Dwarf False Indigo, (photo on previous page)
- Elecampane, and
- Dotted blazing star.

**Fall Plantings:** Her Garden Log notes 18 species planted in the fall that were not noted prior to 1912. (Complete list in separate file) During the Garden season Eloise would obtain her plant material from local sources unlike her 1912 Spring plantings which all came from out of state sources. As a result all the Autumn plantings were species native to the state.

All were from local sources except those from Mr. Chase. Only seven of the species are present in the Garden today. An interesting plant on this list is the Cork Elm, *Ulmus thomasi*, interesting because it is a tree and she obtained it from a source in Colorado, although its native range is eastward from Minnesota and Iowa, touching only a few counties on the west bank of the Mississippi.
Fall weather was of average temperatures, adequate rain in September, much less in October and none in November. Some snow arrived in December but at the end of the year there was only a 2 inch average snow depth on the ground.

Each day during the Garden Season, Eloise would commute to the garden from her quarters in South Minneapolis. In her annual report to the Board of Park Commissioners she added a few thoughts about the Garden enlargement and some of the issues that irritated her:

"Another cause for congratulations is the generous extension of the Garden limits by the addition of an adjacent hillside and meadow. The labor of the curator would be materially brightened if the garden were fenced and more warning signs posted."

[She reported that her work consisted of conducting visitors, exterminating pestilent weeds and protecting the property from marauders.] "For 'tis true, 'tis pity, and pity 'tis, 'tis true' that a small proportion of our citizens have not yet learned to name the birds without a gun, or to love the wood rose and leave it on its stalk." (note 3)

Note 1. The complete article can be found in Martha Hellander’s book The Wild Gardener.  
Note 2. Published July 16, 1911, Minneapolis Sunday Tribune  
Note 3. Annual Report to the Board of Park Commissioners, contained in the Park Boards comprehensive report dated Nov. 8, 1912

Reference Notes

Photo top of first page: Eloise Butler traversing the Quaking Bog. Located just west of the Garden, the bog was a source of plants for Eloise to transplant into the Garden wetland. Photo courtesy Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis Collection #M2632J

References:

Garden Log - Native Plant Reserve, Glenwood Park, Minneapolis, MN by Eloise Butler
Martha Crane's Garden Log and her 1951 Census of plants in the Garden.
Various papers and correspondence of Eloise Butler in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.
Historical Climatology of Minneapolis-St. Paul Area by Charles Fisk.
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