

WOMEN BOTANISTS AND BOTANICAL ARTISTS

BY BRIAN R. THOMPSON

This is the fifth article in a series about historical women botanists and botanical artists. The previous four can be found in the Winter 2019–2022 issues of the “Bulletin.” This article is focused on botanists in California.

Alice Eastwood



Alice Eastwood, circa 1910. (Photo: California Academy of Sciences)

Born in Toronto, Alice Eastwood (1859–1953) had a challenging childhood. Her mother died when she was only six years old, admonishing Alice from her deathbed to look after two younger siblings. Alice’s father struggled to have a viable career and keep the family together. At times, Eastwood was forced to stay with relatives or at a boarding school. It wasn’t until many years later that the family reunited in Denver.

Despite these hardships, Eastwood was fortunate to have mentoring by different individuals who fostered her great love of plants. Exploring the native flora in the mountains of Colorado deepened that passion. Her life story is told in a delightful, memoir-style book from 1955, “Alice Eastwood’s Wonderland: The Adventures of a Botanist” by Carol Green Wilson.

In her early 30s, Eastwood traveled to California and met two other influential women of plants. The first was horticulturist Kate Sessions (1857–1940) in San Diego. Wilson describes their friendship, which lasted for 50 years, as one that “often drew Alice Eastwood from the cloisters of pure science to the practical field of horticulture.”

Continuing her journey to San Francisco, Eastwood visited the California Academy of Sciences to meet Katherine Brandegee (1844–1920) and her husband T.S. Brandegee (1843–1925). Their friendship was cemented by joint botanical excursions around the Bay Area.

The Brandegees eventually convinced Eastwood to become the joint curator of the botanical collection at the Academy. It was not easy to lure Eastwood away from her beloved Rockies, but the salary of \$75 per month, all of Katherine’s income, sealed the deal. Within two years, the Brandegees retired, leaving Eastwood as sole curator and head of botany for the Academy, a position she held until her own retirement over 50 years later. During her career, she authored hundreds of publications on plants and named many new species.

While regarded as one of the supreme botanists in California’s history, Eastwood is probably most famous for her rescue efforts of the Academy’s herbarium collections threatened by the fires that followed the 1906 earthquake. With the help of one chance volunteer, she lowered nearly 1500 of the herbarium’s most valuable specimens using rope, strings, and her work apron! She continued her efforts to save Academy collections over the following days, even while losing her own home to the fires.

KATHERINE BRANDEGEE

Katherine Brandegee’s education as a child was

spotty, and her first marriage was to a man who died of alcoholism. Widowed at age 30, she became only the third woman to matriculate at the University of California-Berkeley medical school. She completed her degree but, instead of becoming a physician, chose to pursue botany, eventually becoming the curator of Botany at the California Academy of Sciences.

In her early 40s, she met T. S. Brandegee, a civil engineer of similar age, who had a passion for botanical exploration. He had made several extended trips to Baja California searching for new plants.

The book about the Brandegees has yet to be written, but a detailed story of their lives was told by Nancy Carol Carter in the Fall 2011 issue of the journal “Eden,” published by the California Garden & Landscape History Society. This includes their unique honeymoon trip, walking from where they were married in San Diego to San Francisco, botanizing all the way.

KATE SESSIONS



Kate Sessions. (Photo San Diego Union-Tribune)

Kate Sessions (1857–1940) was born in San Francisco but lived her adult life in San Diego, where she became a well-known nursery owner, florist, and promoter of native and other climate-appropriate plants in that city. In 2020, the San Diego Floral Association published a collec-

tion of four decades of her writings from the magazine “California Garden.” Sessions’ life is also captured in “The Tree Lady,” a children’s book that details her efforts to beautify her adopted city.

While the articles may seem out of scope for Pacific Northwest readers, they

capture a great deal of interesting garden history. This includes Sessions’ effort to encourage the planting of natives, such as California lilac (*Ceanothus* species), and using South African bulbs instead of trying to coax daffodils to bloom in a desert climate.

Together, Sessions and Eastwood collaborated on increasing our horticultural and botanical knowledge of many plants. They were instrumental in the founding of the American Fuchsia Society. Sessions also knew the Brandegees. In 1900, she traveled with T. S. to San Jose del Cabo, Mexico (four days by steamer), and then into the mountains (three days by burro) to collect seeds and living specimens of a newly discovered palm (*Brahea brandegeei*) named after him. Sessions’ efforts ensured that the palm tree is now well established in San Diego parks.

In her opening essay for the Floral Association publication, Nancy Carol Carter (also author of the “Eden” article on the Brandegees) wrote, “Sessions intentionally stepped away from women’s work and into a male-dominated world of horticulture.” Having never married, “she enjoyed her personal autonomy and freedom from the household responsibilities generally expected of women at the time.”

YNÉS MEXÍA

Ynés Mexía (1870–1938) didn’t discover her career passion until later in life. The daughter of a Mexican diplomat father and an American mother, she had a difficult childhood stemming



Ynés Mexía (Photo: New York Botanical Garden)

from her parent’s divorce and several subsequent moves throughout the eastern United States. She spent her 20s and 30s in Mexico, living through two marriages, and then moved to San Francisco in her 40s, where she required years of medical care to

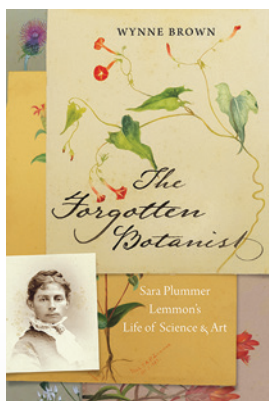
recover from a mental and physical breakdown.

As part of her treatment, her doctor encouraged getting involved in hobbies. She discovered the Sierra Club and eventually enrolled, at age 51, at the University of California, Berkeley. While not seeking a degree, she took courses on botany, including classes through the California Academy of Sciences, where she met Alice Eastwood. Together, they joined on field botany trips into the mountains of California.

While this became a valuable collaboration, Mexía discovered that she most enjoyed exploring alone. Over a 13-year career that followed, she took many long trips—to Mexico, throughout South America, and, briefly, to Alaska—collecting plants to press and later sell to many of the outstanding U.S. herbarium collections. The details of these travels are chronicled in “The Perfect Specimen,” by Durlynn Anema.

Mexía’s career, cut short by her death from cancer, was extremely productive, adding about 150 thousand new specimens to American botany, including several new species. She was not bothered by rough conditions, and her knowledge of Spanish language and culture, and the ease with which she interacted with indigenous people, allowed her to explore remote areas for new plants.

SARA PLUMMER LEMMON



Sara Plummer Lemmon (1836–1923) was a transplanted easterner, moving from New York to California in her early 30s with the hope of finding a climate that would improve her health. She settled in Santa Barbara, establishing a library and becoming interested in the native flora.

A decade later, she married John Gill (“JG”) Lemmon (1831–1908), a survivor of the notorious Andersonville prison in the Civil War, who had also moved to California for his health. Together they explored the mountains of Arizona,

California and Mexico, developing an important herbarium, now housed at the University of California, Berkeley. Unlike the other botanists in this article, Sara was also a skilled botanical illustrator. Her and JG’s story is told in “The Forgotten Botanist,” by Wynne Brown.

Sara was an advocate for having the California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) named the state flower. Although the designation was first proposed to the state legislature in 1895 and passed both houses nearly unanimously, two succeeding governors refused to sign the bill for unrelated political reasons, postponing enactment until 1903.

The joint headstone for JG and Sara in Oakland’s Mountain View Cemetery lists them as “partners in botany.” Author Brown reflects, “The actual balance of that partnership between JG and the woman known to the world as ‘& wife’ is still—and probably always will be—up for question,” but she concludes that many future ecologists will “rely on the work of this determined couple.” 🌻

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