Women Gardeners and Botanical Artists

By Brian R. Thompson

A plate from Jane Loudon's "The Ladies' Flower Garden of Ornamental Annuals" (1844).

In 1827, a novel entitled "The Mummy!" was published anonymously in London. The plot included the reawakening of an Egyptian mummy in the year 2126—hence the title. However, the characters were mostly vehicles for wide-ranging observations of a utopian society the author expected to evolve by that time.

The book came to the attention of John Loudon (1783–1843), who was the editor of the "Gardener's Magazine" and well known for his "An Encyclopaedia of Gardening." His specific interest was the novel's portrayal of technology in the 22nd century, including steam-powered plows, and it led him to arrange a meeting with the author.

Why am I discussing this book—which the Miller Library does not own—in this column? Because it was written by 20-year-old Jane Webb (1807–1858). John was surprised to learn that the author of this horror fiction was not a man. However, it was clearly a happy meeting: He and Jane soon married and became a powerful writing and editing team for horticulture in the 1830s and 1840s.

Jane Webb Loudon knew nothing of horticulture when she married John, but she quickly learned. She also recognized that the existing literature on horticulture was primarily for a male readership. With her husband's support, she began publishing books intended for women. Bea Howe captures much of her story in "Lady with Green Fingers," especially the practical nature of her advice for both garden culture and design, and her "fresh and entirely unsentimental approach to flowers and plants."

Webb Loudon's most significant work was "The Ladies' Flower Garden," a multi-volume set with each volume focused on a particular type of plant. The Miller Library has the first volume in this series, which was devoted to annuals. While this book is in the Library's Rare Book Room and only available to view by appointment, many of the illustrations appear in "Garden Flowers from Plates by Jane Loudon"—a 1948 book in the general collection, authored by Robert Gathorne-Hardy. These illustrations were noteworthy for the time because they included many different species on the same plate, set in loose arrangements that show contrasting features while maintaining scientific accuracy. The illustrations were also a big selling point for "The Ladies' Flower Room" because, at the time, they were expensive to produce—and Loudon was able to show a great number of species in a single book.

More biographical information about John Loudon and Jane Webb Loudon is found in "The Loudons and the Gardening Press" by Sarah

Dewis. Here you learn that their work was a family affair, as two of John's sisters and other family members created many of the illustrations. These artists include H. Noel Humphreys (1810–1879), who drew the images for the volume on annuals.

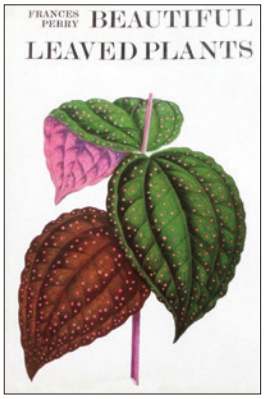
20th Century Plantswoman

Frances Perry (1907–1993) perceived a similar lack of horticultural information for women more than a century after Jane Webb Loudon. As a horticultural lecturer, horticultural advisor (to her county council), and gardening correspondent in England, she noted an ongoing demographic change: More and more women were attending her presentations or writing her letters. Her colleagues, both men and women, had also observed this change.

To address this need, she published "The Woman Gardener" (1955). In addition to offering general gardening advice, Perry included topics she thought would have special interest for women. For example, an early chapter is titled "Salads and Quick Return Vegetables" and recognizes that "most housewives will agree that the first requirement of any salad ingredient is that it should be fresh." Later chapters present miniature gardens in various forms, houseplants, and tips on flower arranging and keeping cut flowers fresh—subjects not typically addressed in other general gardening books of the time. She broke down other barriers of the male hierarchy of British horticulture by becoming the first woman council member of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1968 and, a decade later, vice president of that organization.

Perry is best known for her mastery and promotion of water gardening, beginning with her publication in 1938 of "Water Gardening." While first learning about the topic, she wrote in her preface "the dearth of literature upon the subject was the cause of much disappointment. There was no one volume devoted entirely to aquatics that contained all the plants that I wanted to know about." She did much to remedy this deficiency throughout her long career, writing about the topic into the 1980s.

Brent Elliott, retired librarian and historian of the Royal Horticultural Society, praised Perry for her innovation and the total sum of her publications in his account of her life in the September 2018 issue of "The Plantsman." He observed that she was a rare visitor to the RHS Library because she had developed her own excellent private library. He also declared that her writing showed "evidence of reading both broader and deeper than that of most garden writers of the time."

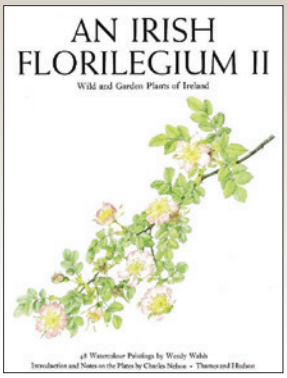


An example of this historical awareness is her book "Beautiful Leaved Plants." In it, Perry describes 64 house and conservatory plants, popular in the mid-20th century, but chose to illustrate her selections with images by Benjamin Fawcett (1808–1893). Fawcett was a botanical illustrator who used wood engravings, an unusual technique for the time that is particularly effective in capturing the brilliance and subtlety of foliage.

Irish Botanical Artist

Women botanical artists have made many contributions to horticulture and botany. One of these was Wendy Walsh (1915–2014). English by birth, she also lived in Japan and the United States before settling in Ireland in 1958 at the age of 43. She lived and worked there the rest of her long life, providing illustrations for 33 books, many on Irish gardening and native plants.

Her masterpieces were "An Irish Florilegium," published in 1983, followed by "An Irish Florilegium II" in 1987. Each contains beautifully printed copies of 48 watercolor paintings that she drew from nature. Roughly a third of these plants are native to Ireland, while another



third were introduced by an Irish botanist or plant collector. The rest celebrate cultivars developed by the many fine nurseries and plant hybridizers of that nation.

E. Charles Nelson, a taxonomist with the National Botanic Gardens Glasnevin in Dublin, wrote the extensive plant notes to both volumes and the introduction to the second. Although he was 36 years younger, he and Walsh became fast friends after meeting at the beginning of this project. Their collaboration led to several more books, including three in the Miller Library.

One of these is "Hardy Heathers from the Northern Hemisphere," published by the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew in 2011. It is already the standard reference for European species and cultivars of *Calluna*, *Daboecia* and *Erica*. Nelson wrote this book and used images by a number of contemporary and historical artists that were depicted in several media, including photography. For me, the watercolors of species by Walsh, sometimes accompanied by a sketch of the related ecosystem in the background, stand out for their naturalness—even more so than some of the photographs.

Nelson wrote a remembrance to Walsh in the Summer 2016 issue of "Hortus." He described her as a "frugal artist," meaning she kept considerable white space to highlight her subjects. She was particularly keen on painting white or near-white flowers or the subtleties of tree leaves in varying shades of green. "I sometimes think of Wendy as an alchemist, transforming intangible light into a permanent work of art. She could capture with her eyes the rays of light reflected by, or transmitted through, a petal or a leaf, and possessed the inexhaustible patience to transfer those rays through her hands, a brush, and some watercolour paints, to a piece of vellum or sheet of paper."

American-Australian Collaboration

Ellis Rowan (1848–1922) was an Australian painter who specialized in the wildflowers of that country at a time when the native flora was not well known by European settlers. She did not train as a botanist, which made her work of limited use in that field. However, the exuberance and abundance of her paintings (at least 3000 survive) made her very popular. She typically combined flowers with leaves and stems into bouquets and worked quickly, painting in watercolors and gouache without initial pencil underlay.

In "Flower Paintings of Ellis Rowan," Helen Hewson wrote that her images "evoke the particular quality of the beauty of the Australian bush, a beauty which is vivid, yet also elusive and vulnerable." Hewson notes the limitations of Rowan's work for botanists but recognizes that "her work is so accurate that the specialist can identify a large proportion of the subjects with considerable reliability."

"Flame Azalea," by Ellis Rowan, from "Southern Wild Flowers and Trees" (1901).

Rowan was also a fearless traveler—even in her later years—visiting Europe, the United States, New Zealand and New Guinea. It was on a visit to the U.S. that Alice Lounsberry (1873–1949) of Boston, some 25 years younger, introduced herself to Rowan. Lounsberry convinced Rowan to travel with her for two years, providing illustrations for three books she wrote on native plants: "A Guide to the Wild Flowers" (1899), "A Guide to Trees" (1900), and "Southern Wild Flowers and Trees" (1901).

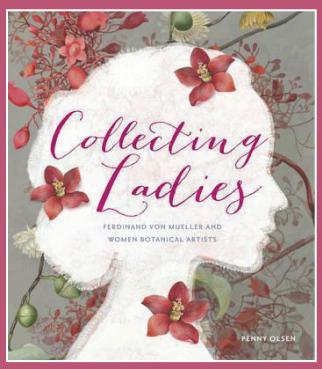
At the turn of the 20th century, it was an adventure—especially for two women—to be exploring the rural parts of the Southeast. In

"Southern Wild Flower and Trees," Lounsberry writes "Mrs. Rowan and I travelled in many parts of the south, exercising always our best blandishments to get the people of the section to talk with us. Through the mountainous region we drove from cabin to cabin, and nowhere could we have met with greater kindness and hospitality." The illustrations include plates in color, many black and white diagrams, and some delightful vignettes, typically showing native plants in the context of a larger landscape.

They were a good team. Lounsberry provided detailed botanic structure, along with engaging observations of her subjects and their natural history, while Rowan's artwork found a new audience. Together, their books were very popular.

Women of Flowers

Jack Kramer is a prolific American author on many gardening topics, and we have 25 of his books in the Miller Library. His wide range includes many single plant profiles (orchids are a favorite), histories, and the designing and building of gardens in various styles. My favorite of his books is "Women of Flowers: A Tribute to Victorian Women Illustrators" (1996). Others agree: It won the Garden Writers Association of America Award of Excellence for Best Book in 1996.



Kramer primarily profiles British illustrators. For an antipodal viewpoint, consider "Collecting Ladies: Ferdinand von Mueller and Women Botanical Artists," by Penny Olson (2013). The subjects in this book are Australian women, many of whom were encouraged in their botanical pursuits by Mueller, a leading botanist of the Australia colonies in the mid-to-late 1800s. The women "benefited from the milieu that Mueller helped to create so effectively in Australia, where most botanical roads led to him."

Brian R. Thompson is the manager and curator of the Elisabeth C. Miller Library of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens. He is also a member of the "Bulletin" Editorial Board.

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*Non-lending
**Rare book room, by appointment only