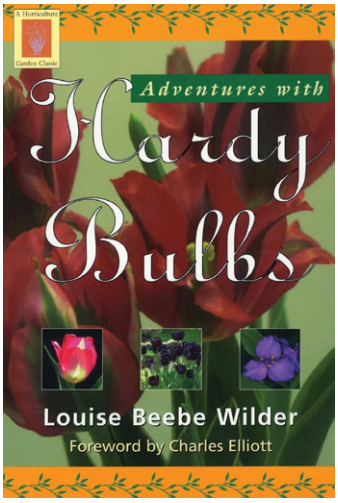
WOMEN BOTANISTS AND BOTANICAL ARTISTS

By Brian R. Thompson

Since 2019, I have been profiling women botanists and botanical illustrators of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the winter issue of "The Bulletin." This article is the eighth in that series, and it focuses on some important gardening figures from that period, all of them based in northeastern North America.

Louise Beebe Wilder



"Adventure may be met with any day, any hour, on one's doorstep, just around the corner; it may lurk in the subway, on a bus top, in the garden." With this quote, Louise Beebe Wilder (1878–1938) begins her charm offensive to encourage, entice, and otherwise convince readers of the excitement that awaits them in her 1936 book, "Adventures with Hardy Bulbs."

I first read this book in the early 1990s, and it quickly became a favorite. Wilder's writing is infectious, insightful, and sometimes spicy. She spurred me to broaden my interest in the various bulbous plants, including those growing from rhizomes, tubers, corms and other underground structures.

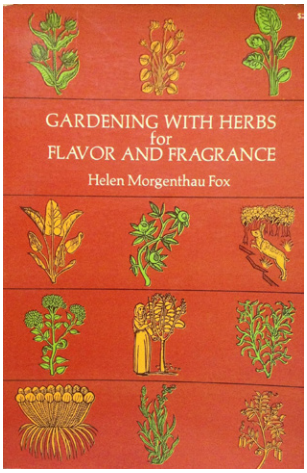
Because she gardened in New York State, I was surprised by the attention she paid to West Coast native plants. It was through her that I became aware of the garden worthiness of the genus *Camassia*, our native camas. She quotes and makes frequent reference to Carl Purdy (1861–1945), who lived in Mendocino County, California and was a major advocate for the preservation of native plants, especially bulbs.

Wilder's most famous book, "Colour in my Garden," is also one of her earliest, published in 1918. Like all her books (the Miller Library has 10 of them), it is based on her direct experience, augmented by occasional insights from other keen gardeners she knew through correspondence. At first, she was satisfied that things would simply grow for her. Soon, she came "to enjoy, not only the individual flower, but to make the most of it in relation to other flowers."

This leads to a chronological journey through the garden year, focused on mingling plants in pleasing ways. Wilder not only does this through

the lens of flower color, as suggested by the book's title, but also by showing her readers how to create a series of design "pictures" throughout the year, while recognizing the futility of trying to have the garden "abloom for months at a time." How does one deal with an area of a garden out of bloom? "Their fullness and freshness shall be maintained by luxuriant and beautiful foliage."

Wilder recognized that describing this complexity in words alone would be difficult to follow, and wisely included 24 impressionistic paintings of her garden by artist neighbor Anna Winegar. All these beautiful images were painted in the same year, from early spring to early fall. The detailed captions are a good starting point for reading this book. Later paintings often show the same view of the garden as captured earlier, emphasizing Wilde's goal of continuity.



Helen Morgenthau Fox

If you are in New York City, I recommend visiting The Cloisters, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the very north tip of Manhattan. During my visit, I especially enjoyed the surrounding gardens that include many of the plants found in a medieval, European monastic garden used for both medicinal and culinary purposes.

One of the early contributors of plants to that garden was Helen Morgenthau Fox (1884–1974), an avid gardener and prolific author of well-researched gardening books. In 1933, she wrote, "Gardening with Herbs for Flavor and Fragrance," an outstanding work of scholarship. Before she began writing, Fox was determined to first grow all the included plants for at least three years.

At this time, it was not easy to buy herbs in the form of young plants. Most had to be grown from seeds, and these could also be hard to obtain. But Fox was ingenious and thorough in her efforts. She contacted experts at nearby botanic gardens and made inquiries of members of garden clubs near her home, just north of New York City. Through deep research into the literature of herbs—dating back to the 1500s—Fox also discovered the existence of many more herb varieties than she could find locally. To obtain these, she reached out to gardeners around the world.

This effort proved successful. She recalled, "seed packets arrived from Algiers, Portugal, Spain, India, France, England and Scotland. By the end of March, seedlings filled my little greenhouse to capacity." Fox's research continued with the plants as they grew. Every day, she would "sit on the ground beside the herbs, and measure, describe, taste and smell them." She also consulted historical herbarium specimens—and with living experts—to confirm the accurate identity of the plants she was growing.

The text captures a sense of the adventure, in a style similar to that of Louise Beebe Wilder. It is often very funny. In a chapter titled "The Witches' Cauldron," she describes various love potions, including one given to a character in an opera by Richard Wagner. After the potion is sneaked into the intended's beverage, "the audience sits through three-quarters of an hour of passionate music until the drink takes effect."

Like Wilder, Fox was prolific, and we have six other books by her in the Miller Library on a wide range of garden-related topics. These include the patio gardens of Spain, the challenges of growing lilies (this was long before they became popular), and a biography of André Le Nôtre (1613–1700), landscape architect to Louis XIV, known as the "Sun King" of France.

I find most interesting her book translating the diaries of Armand David, a French Catholic priest sent to China in the 1860s and 1870s. David

had a deep interest in biology and introduced to European science many of the plants and animals of China. He was also a keen observer of life and recorded his reflections in diaries later published in French. Fox, who was fluent in that language, wanted "to make these authentic and amusing stories available in English."

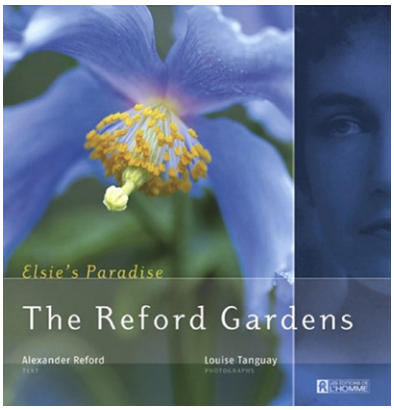
Louise Mansfield

Helen Morgenthau Fox enhanced her book "Gardening with Herbs for Flavor and Fragrance" with poetry, historical quotes, recipes, and an extensive bibliography. The most striking addition was a dozen drawings of herbs by Louise Mansfield (1876–1970).

Mansfield was a noted flower painter and scientific illustrator from upstate New York whose work could be found in both popular books and scientific journals. One of her special projects was painting 150 Japanese and species iris at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Many of these were shown at the World's Fairs in Chicago in 1933 and in New York in 1939. Later iris portraits were published in the "Bulletin of the American Iris Society."

Mansfield and Fox were good friends. They intended to collaborate on a larger herbal—on the scale of historical examples found in Europe—but the Depression limited those dreams. Instead, many of Mansfield's graphite drawings are collected in "An Artist's Herbal," a more modest book she published in 1937.

Each illustration—the originals now held at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden—is accompanied by a brief description of the flowers, the plant structure, and herbal usages. While neither the illustrations nor the descriptions would meet the rigorous standard of botanical illustration, both have a charming, lyrical quality. For example, rosemary (labeled as *Rosmarinus officinalis* but now known as *Salvia rosmarinus*) is described as "boat-shaped with a pointed prow. To starboard and to port it spreads a graceful wing; and at the stern, it rises in a little leaning tower."



Elsie Reford

All the previous gardeners in this review were from New York State. Much farther north was the garden of Elsie Reford (1872–1967), located in Grand-Métis, Quebec, near where the Métis River flows into the broad expanse of the Estuary of St. Lawrence. While the region is extremely cold in the winter, the huge, annual snowfall (averaging over 11 feet!) and favorable micro-climates protect many typically alpine plants that flourish in the short, cool summers.

The life story of Elsie Reford is the heart of the 2004 book "The Reford Gardens," written by her great-grandson, Alexander Reford, current director of Les Jardins de Métis (as the now-public garden is known today). Although he only knew his great-grandmother when he was a small child, Alexander researched the careful diaries she kept, and the documentation

of the garden made by his great-grandfather, Elsie's husband, Robert Wilson Reford, who was an avid, amateur photographer. Sumptuous, present-day color photographs of the garden by Louise Tanguay complement this historical collection.

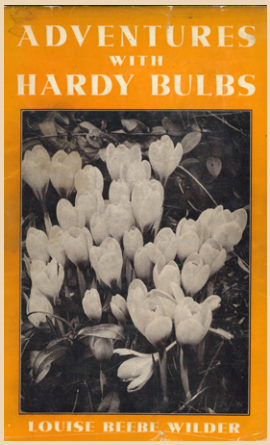
The garden site was originally a dense, conifer forest that Elsie's uncle purchased and maintained as a fishing lodge. Elsie inherited her uncle's passion for angling and the place, was a regular summer visitor, and eventually inherited the large property. At the age of 53, after suffering from appendicitis, she turned her attention to horticulture and, over the next three decades, created a 20-acre garden.

Elsie designed the garden herself. According to Alexander, "From her reading and her own appreciation of the landscape, Elsie Reford designed a garden that integrates native and exotic plants in a flowing, naturalistic fashion." It proved ideal for many of her favorite plants, including primulas, azaleas, peonies and lilies, and it boasts one of the finest collections of gentians anywhere. But this was not just a collector's garden. "While Elise collected plants, she did so with an eye to amplifying their beauty by careful placement."

The garden is most famous for its Himalayan blue poppies (*Meconopsis* species), with more than 10 thousand of them on display. Native to the summer-wet, alpine and sub-alpine areas of the Himalayan Mountains, these coveted plants only became known to European and American gardeners in 1926. Ten years later, Elsie had a collection of at least six species.

Today, Elsie's garden has expanded to 45 acres, with over 3,000 species and varieties of plants. To help fund and promote it, Alexander began in 2000 an International Garden Festival that runs for four months each summer. There is no theme for participating gardens to follow. There are no prizes. Unlike many garden shows, it has no ropes or fences; visitors are welcomed to enter and explore. As profiled in a chapter of "Lives of the Great Gardeners" by Stephen Anderton (2016), it has "become an international icon of Canadian gardening, and one of the leading garden festivals in the world."

AN ARTISTIC CLAN



Louise Beebe Wilder dedicated her book, "Adventure with Hardy Bulbs," to her son Walter Beebe Wilder, for his help in growing bulbs and keeping garden records, and "for his work of illustrating this book with pen and camera." In a quick search of the Internet, I found that some of Walter's floral, black and white photographs are still available for purchase today. This was an artistically talented family, as Louise's husband, Walter Robb Wilder, was the co-designer of the Washington State Capitol in Olympia.

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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