

Desert Plants

A quarterly journal devoted to broadening knowledge of plants indigenous or adaptable to arid and sub-arid regions, to studying the growth thereof and to encouraging an appreciation of these as valued components of the landscape.

Frank S. Crosswhite, editor

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Editorial

To Instill in Mankind an Appreciation of Plants.

In the 1920's W. B. Thompson founded the Arboretum at Superior as a place where plants from arid and sub-arid regions of the world could be brought together, inventoried, their uses catalogued, and research conducted to benefit mankind. Toward this end Thompson stated that the Arboretum would be developed in the form of a museum of living plants, a museum designed "to instill in mankind an appreciation of plants" while (with the same plants) providing scientists the source materials for appropriate research. The collection of desert plants at Superior has grown and prospered during the last 60 years, becoming a virtual "tourist attraction" viewed by a conservatively estimated three million people.

Thompson valued plant life very highly. In his travels around the world he became impressed by the fact that desert lands had a general scarcity of plants and that people living there had a very tenuous existence as a result. He learned however that the inhabitants of desert regions made every use possible of what few plants they had, using them for food, fiber, clothing, shelter and fuel.

He was impressed with how tenaciously desert plants could cling to life under terrible conditions of heat, drought and drying winds which quickly killed other plants. Man needed to better appreciate these qualities for their intrinsic merit as well as for their potential in improving other plants. Thompson noted that plant species were different in each of the world's deserts. A useful plant of one desert region might be an extremely valuable addition to the plant assets of another such region. These plants needed to be brought together where they could be compared and studied.

Thompson viewed plants as assets which all too often were wasted by persons who lived where they were abundant, but were heavily utilized (even to the point of extinction) in places where they were scarce. To Thompson the value of all plants was intrinsic; although this value could be seen easiest under desert conditions where plants were a scarce commodity, the value existed in all plant life. In analyzing the situation he concluded that plants were the primary producers of the

world's organic goods. They could produce organic chemicals from two common raw materials: 1) air, and 2) water. They were also capable of changing simple organic substances into more complex ones after absorbing small quantities of nitrogen and various minerals.

The same analytical mind that made millions of dollars for Thompson in the field of natural resources (chiefly mining and oil) told him that plant life represented a great underappreciated and undervalued natural resource which with a little study could be made to yield all sorts of new benefits for mankind. As a gift to humanity and with only a desire to leave this world in a little better condition than when he entered it, Thompson created and endowed two non-profit institutions, each having the general goal of helping man through better appreciating, understanding and developing the hitherto undiscovered or underutilized good qualities which he was firmly convinced waited to be unlocked in plant life.

Both before and after Thompson's death in 1930, the Boyce Thompson Institute for Plant Research in New York has succeeded in making discoveries beyond what could ever have been predicted. It continues today as a brilliant force of dozens of scientists and technicians working in laboratories situated on the campus of Cornell University at Ithaca.

The second institution was the Arboretum in Arizona. Thompson's analytical mind saw a paradox. In deserts where plants were scarce, man seemed to make every use conceivable of them. But where plants were abundant, man poorly appreciated them; without fully utilizing them he was essentially placing himself in an isolation worse than any desert by cutting himself off from the good they could provide. In Arizona Thompson decided to gather together the rugged life forms of desert plants to create an institution one goal of which would be "to instill in mankind an appreciation of plants" which he himself had gained in the world's deserts. Since the 1920's there has been a standing invitation to all persons to view the collection. The Arboretum is open to the public from 8:00 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. every day of the year except Christmas.