

City Wild Flower Gardener Rescues Plants From Bulldozers

By JANE THOMAS

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For 34 years, Mrs. Martha Crone has been a one-woman rescue squad.

Armed with a garden trowel, she saves Minnesota's precious wild flowers from tractor treads and the teeth of steam shovels.

A few years ago, she found a spot of wild poinsettias growing in New Ulm, Minn., and brought one back to Minneapolis. Since then a building boom has plowed under the New Ulm poinsettias. Hers is the only one left in the state. It blooms securely with other "rescued" plants in the wild flower glen in Theodore Wirth park.

MRS. CRONE has been curator of the wild flower garden for 15 years. Before that she was assistant—rewarded only by the joy of gardening—to Eloise Butler, who founded the garden in 1907.

Broad, bright patches of 1,000 kinds of wild plants native to Minnesota grow in the 13-acre garden—either in the dell around four small ponds or in the upland garden started in 1944 for prairie flowers. Mrs. Crone, who has possibly the greenest thumbs in the state, has coaxed foreigners to bloom there, too—the Great Yellow lily from Montana and azaleas from North Carolina.

There is even a bold clump of poison ivy, set back a ways from the garden path. Mrs. Crone cares for it as tenderly as a wood violet.

"It's educational," she says.

THIS PRETTY piece of wilderness is just one block off highway 12. An original between-the-lakes Indian trail runs through it, and the original hush of the woods hangs over it.

"It's quiet enough sometimes to hear the hummingbirds' wings," says Mrs. Crone, "and the mosquitoes."

Troops of people touring the garden—2,000 come some Sundays—seem quiet, too, except for the children who shout to hear their echoes. Mrs. Crone herself, with her graceful voice and calm eyes, seems to have caught some of the peace of the place.

A tiny house stands in the center of the woods. In this "once upon a time" atmosphere, children might well expect the house to have a candy roof and be surrounded by gingerbread people. Actually it is no fairytale hut, but one of the smallest office buildings in town—possibly the only office without electricity or a telephone.

INSIDE THE HOUSE are shelves of birds nest, wasp and other specimens, and water buckets, in-



MRS. MARTHA CRONE, WILD FLOWER EXPERT
Founds identifying stake in pet patch of blue lupine

one corner stands a wood stove for cold days. Mrs. Crone, who lives at 3723 Lyndale avenue N., arrives at the garden in early April with the first snow trillium and stays until November when the witch hazel blooms.

Mrs. Crone, considered by plant experts as one of the country's most talented botanists, can remember as a child of four making a home in a vegetable garden for a rue anemone she found in the woods. Clinton Odell, the "motivating spirit" of the garden, whose interest in wild flowers is as faithful as Mrs. Crone's, claims she has a special sixth sense for finding hidden flowers.

"In all my botanizing trips I've never been lost," said Mrs. Crone, but admits she carries a compass in a swamp. "You can't always find a compass flower to guide you," she said, referring to the plant whose leaves point north, east, south and west.

BESIDES RESCUING flowers from steam shovels, Mrs. Crone has saved a lot of human beings from a worse fate. She is one of a few "mushroom experts" who can tell the difference between an edible mushroom and the Death Cap. Destroying

Angel. Long ago she disproved the old wife's tale about boiling a questionable mushroom with a dime in the pan to see if the dime turned black.

As well as conducting daily tours in the garden, doing all the necessary planting and bar-

ting weeds which could choke the wild flower garden: in the short space of two years, Mr. Crone, now a widow and grandmother, travels an average of 2,000 miles a month. Sometimes she takes color photographs to add to her collection of 2,200 which she uses for winter lectures.

Sometimes she digs up plants sets them in moist moss and brings them back in the extra big trunk of her car. Often when she returns home late she plants her wild flowers after dark. One whole bed of violets was planted one night by the light of the moon and a lantern propped in the path.

"Wild flowers are my life work," she says. "And they're important. Everything was wiped out."

June 10
1951