

CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS  
BOARD OF PARK COMMISSIONERS  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
ELOISE BUTLER WILD FLOWER GARDEN

THEODORE WIRTH PARK

By MARTHA E. CRONE  
Curator of the Garden



SHOWY LADY'S-SLIPPER  
MINNESOTA STATE FLOWER

BOARD OF PARK COMMISSIONERS  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Chas. E. Doell, Superintendent  
of Parks

Gregory J. Lucking,  
Horticulturist

HISTORY  
of the  
ELOISE BUTLER WILD FLOWER GARDEN

By Martha Crone

April 1951

The idea of the wild flower garden arose from the difficulties experienced by the teachers of botany in familiarizing their students with living plants growing in their natural surroundings. Long journeys had been made with their classes, only to find but few scattered plants, which perhaps by the next season were exterminated by the needs of a rapidly-growing city. Thus was gradually evolved the plan of obtaining before it was too late a plot of land that could support the greater share of our Minnesota flora.

An ideal spot, fulfilling all requirements, was found in Theodore Wirth Park (then known as Glenwood Park), the largest park area in Minneapolis, and one interspersed with hills and valleys and possessed of great natural beauty. To the original tract comprising about three acres, additional area was added from time to time, until at present the garden totals thirteen acres.

Early in April 1907, the wild flower garden was installed without any ceremony, except the taking of a census of the indigenous flora and the introducing at once of a number of varieties.

Until 1911, the garden was cared for by the botany teachers as a labor of love, without compensation. In 1911 Miss Eloise Butler, upon retiring as botany teacher in our public schools, was made full-time curator, a position she occupied until April 10, 1933, at which time she passed away in her beloved garden.

On June 19, 1929, the wild flower reserve was named "The Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden" in recognition of Miss Butler's efforts to create the garden and of her service as its first curator.

Upon Miss Butler's passing in 1933 at the age of 82 years, Mrs. Martha Crone became curator, a position she still fills at this writing (1951). She was quite familiar with the garden and its service to the community, having assisted Miss Butler in her duties some fifteen years or more.

On May 5, 1933, members of the Board of Park Commissioners, together with approximately a hundred friends and former students of Miss Butler, gathered at the Wild Flower Garden to pay tribute to the memory of its founder. The Honorable Alfred F. Pillsbury, President of the Board at that time, was the principal speaker. An oak tree was planted in memory of Miss Butler and her ashes were strewn upon the area nearby. Theodore Wirth, General Superintendent of Parks, suggested that a year hence a bronze tablet, to be contributed by her friends, be placed on a boulder near the tree to perpetuate the dedication.

On May 4 of the following year, the bronze tablet was placed and dedicated, reading as follows:

IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
E L O I S E B U T L E R  
1851 - 1933

TEACHER OF BOTANY IN MINNEAPOLIS SCHOOLS  
FOUNDER AND FIRST CURATOR OF THIS  
N A T I V E P L A N T R E S E R V E

This oak has been planted and this  
tablet erected by a grateful public

To this sequestered glen Miss Butler gathered from all sections of our state specimens of its beautiful native plants and tended them with patient care. This priceless garden is our heritage from her and its continued preservation a living testimony of our appreciation. Here her ashes are scattered and here her protective spirit lingers.

-----

The ups and downs of the garden have been many. The cyclones of 1926 and 1927 left great destruction. It was during these storms that the majestic white oak, often estimated to be 700 years old, was destroyed, and most of the tamaracks were uprooted.

During the unprecedented drought of 1934 and 1935, a large percentage of the plants disappeared, so that in the years following a complete re-establishment of much of the flora was necessary. Up to 1951, the present curator, Martha Crone, has set out in the garden some 42,500 plants.

The original plan of the garden has been greatly changed. When it was established in 1907, the population of Minneapolis was only 300,000. Large attendance was not encouraged, since only two narrow footpaths led through the garden, which could accommodate very few -- and it has always been deemed inadvisable for visitors to roam at will. Now that the city had more than doubled its population, it was found necessary to widen the trails considerably, to gravel them, and extend the walks to all parts of the garden, winding gracefully through the glen, the swamp, and over the hills.

The original plan of allowing plants to grow at will after they were once established, and without restraint, soon proved disastrous. Several easy-growing varieties spread very rapidly and soon shaded out some of the more desirable plants. An attempt was made to check them, but with limited help, this proved to be a problem.

On a knoll above the swamp and near the south entrance, there is a small building used as an office by the curator, and there are also several smaller shelters for storage of tools and supplies.

In 1917 a huge boulder was hauled into the garden and the top chiseled out on four levels for a bird-bath, and here great numbers of birds congregate.

In 1926 the garden area was surrounded by a fence, to give better protection against vandalism. This fence was replaced by a more permanent installation in 1939.

Minnesota has a flora of wide range, the state extending 600 miles from the Canadian border on the north to Iowa on the south, and 300 miles from the Dakota border on the west to Wisconsin on the east. Included are plants from the forests, the prairies, as well as the Alpine region. Varying soil conditions with moisture and light exposure to satisfy the most fastidious can be met with in the garden to provide the needs of all of these plants.

The admirable location of the garden and the topography of the area, consisting of morainic hills commanding widespread views with intervening valleys, ponds, and bogs, are ideal. Three sizable pools were created by excavation in one of the bogs. A spring drains into another pool which was formed by a dam across a brook. Aquatic plants of various types have been introduced into the pools.

Exclusive of mosses, algae, and fungi, the garden now contains over 1,000 species. Ten species of ferns were indigenous; now there are fifty. Even if a plant lives and thrives, it must be remembered that the life of each individual plant is limited. The span of life for some is very short, others many years. It is therefore quite understandable why a constant replanting must be carried on year after year to maintain a sufficient supply of native plants for educational purposes, to preserve the indigenous flora, and to introduce flora from other regions for the benefit of students of botany and lovers of wild life.

The small percentage of plants that have refused to flourish are faithfully planted again and again until success is finally reached. One of these is the very elusive fringed gentian (*Gentiana crinita* and *procera*) which is one of the last to bloom in late fall; and another is the trailing arbutus (*Epigaea repens*) considered the loveliest flower of early spring and one of exquisite fragrance. Both are extremely difficult to cultivate, but after much painstaking effort over a period of at least fifteen years, they have been brought under successful cultivation.

A novel plan undertaken several years ago has proven very successful -- that of experimenting with plants such as azalea, rhododendron, mountain laurel, and various trilliums. The yellow trillium, which is at home only in the Smokies, is not only well established, but is spreading freely. The others have survived four winters and have bloomed beautifully.

#### THE UPLAND GARDEN

For many years a real need was felt for more space for prairie and upland plants. This need was finally fulfilled in 1944 when, through the generous assistance of a friend of the garden, Mr. C. M. Odell, a tract east of the garden was enclosed with a fence similar to the one already in existence. During mid-summer when the spring flowers have gone and the shade of the woodland is so dense that few plants bloom there, then it is that the prairie and upland garden comes into its own. This tract consists of gently rolling hills and prairie, and is fully 75 feet higher than the woodland garden. The contrast is all the more striking between the upland and the woodland gardens, since they are so closely allied.

It was first necessary to remove the thick growth of sumac which covered the greater portion of this new addition, and several years of persistent digging and cutting were required for its ultimate extermination. Quack grass and ragweed were two other pests that had infested the area.

Further development consisted of laying out, grading, and graveling the trails that extend to all parts of the garden for fully a half mile, winding gracefully around and over the hills -- around the hills for those who do not wish to ascend the slopes.

The over-all plan of development for the upland garden was designed so as to include all of the flora of prairie and upland hills. Here has been brought together vegetation which varies markedly from that of the woodland and bog. In this upland area, plants thrive best which require full sunshine, such as lupine, cactus, penstemon, ground plum, puccoon, bird's-foot violets, coneflowers, and others.

From early spring to freeze-up time in the late fall, a pageant of flowers passes into view. The pasque-flower opens the season, closely followed by prairie crowfoot, purple avens, various violets, and many others. The goldenrods and blue and white asters close the season with a dramatic harmony of contrasting colors, rendering the garden to fairly glow with loveliness. The beauty of the landscape is enhanced by a few scattered, wide-spreading oak trees, both white and red that vie with each other in producing glorious autumnal foliage.

In addition to the plants native to Minnesota, a number representative of other states have been introduced and are flourishing, such as the bitter-root from Montana, a number of species of penstemon from various parts of the west, and many others.

The Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden is famed for the great number of wild flowers flourishing in so small an area. Nowhere else of equal accessibility has Nature provided the necessary combination of rich woods soil in the woodland area, moisture in the bog, and sand and loam in the sunny prairie garden.

The undertaking in establishing the garden was a real challenge, inspiring a great determination to succeed, for in the cultivation of wild plants, many problems are met, some of which respond satisfactorily, while others require considerable patience and intelligent care in handling. To offset the years of drought, a steady supply of water is most essential. This was realized and a water system installed in 1947, connecting with the main on Chestnut and Xerxes Avenue North.

This bit of wilderness where the beauty of Nature's touch is everywhere, is well worth visiting. It is conveniently reached by automobile, as well as by public transportation, and is less than ten minutes drive from the city. A fine view of the towering buildings of a busy metropolis can be had from the upland garden.

A list of plants that grow in the garden is attached.