Georgeson Botanical Garden

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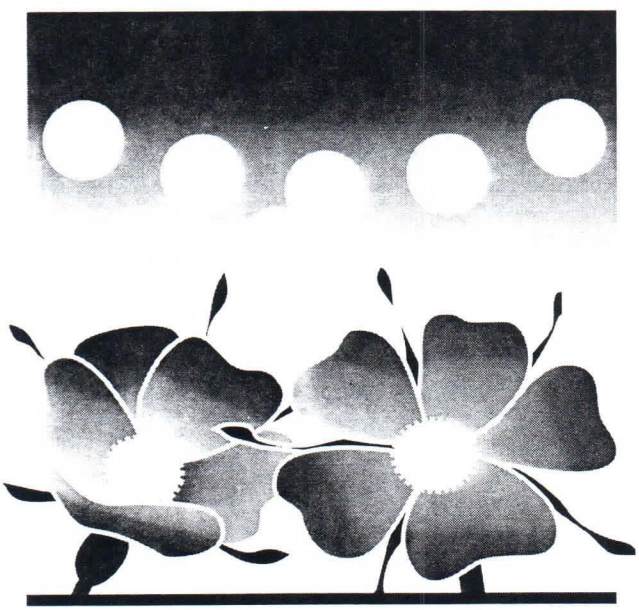
Last summer, the AFES demonstration flower garden became the Charles Georgeson Botanical Garden. For many years, the Garden has contributed valuable information on suitable varieties of annual flowers and vegetables for commercial growers and home gardeners as well as being a major visitor attraction. We're now expanding the Garden to fully reflect our mission as a center for subarctic education and research in the plant sciences.

The Georgeson Botanical Garden is a germplasm repository for plants and seeds of circumpolar species. Far north inhabitants and researchers benefit from studies at the Garden. Plants from the Garden supports faculty and student research in clonal plant propagation, plant cultivation techniques, plant hardiness evaluation, Alaska native plant cultivation and plant breeding. Alaska's only endangered plant species, the Aleutian shield-fern, now grows in the Garden in addition to scattered Aleutian Islands sites. Studies on this fern—spore germination and tissue culture techniques, vegetative propagation methods, and plant growth under controlled conditions—will help determine why this plant is so rare.

The Garden also offers visitors opportunities to learn about the variety of annuals, herbaceous perennials, woody landscape plants, fruit crops, grasses and grains that grow in interior Alaska. Garden plots demonstrate cultivation techniques for maximum fruit and vegetable productivity. Many of the techniques resulted from AFES's horticulture research programs over the past 25 years. During 1991, more than 15,000 people from every state and many foreign countries visited the Garden. Children from 29 local schools studied subarctic plant science through field trips to the Garden.

Many changes have occurred in the Garden during the past year. Through the Special Projects Fund, University of Alaska President Jerome Komisar funded renovation of the Garden entrance. Gravel walkways replaced some of the dirt paths. A kiosk provides a focal point for visitor information and interpretive displays. Near the entrance, a landscaped, dry stream bed replaced a seasonal drainage ditch. Public donations placed park benches throughout the Garden. An observation deck for early-season bird watching and other activities will be completed this spring.



Last March, a volunteer program was begun to assist in expanding the Garden. Alaskans worked in every phase of development including bedding plant production and maintenance, landscape construction, design and maintenance, data collection, graphic arts, plant evaluation and education. In return for their valuable time and effort, they received hands-on education in subarctic horticulture. The program continued during the winter. Volunteers worked on seed germination research, tissue culture, a historical bibliography of Alaska horticulture and greenhouse plant culture.

In 1992, renovations will continue with the relocation of the annual flower and All America Selections display section to a new permanent site. Other construction projects include a Boreal forest nature trail; design and planting of perennial flower beds; and installation of more research test plots. Next summer's research projects will test woody and herbaceous perennial ornamentals, identify frost tolerance of annual flowers, and evaluate greenhouse-applied growth regulators on begonias growth and flowering.

Educational displays will highlight celebrations of the 75th Anniversary of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Crops and techniques common in turn-of-the-century Alaska will be compared to modern crops and cultivation practices.

A sculpture designed by UAF art students will be placed on permanent display at the Garden this summer. Under the direction of Dr. Wendy Ernst, sculpture students will compete in a juried art competition to create a bronze commemorating this anniversary and the university's commitment to Alaska's future in higher education. ❑

portunity to breakfast on strawberries and cream from their own back yard. In seven years he developed a hybrid strawberry "eight of which have been known to fill a quart container."

To complete the menu he searched for a cattle breed that could survive the winter, live off the land and produce good milk for cream. Georgeson imported Galloway cattle to Kodiak and later Yaks to Fairbanks with this goal in mind. Galloway cattle were eventually replaced with Holsteins and the Yak experiments were halted due to lack of funds. But not all his efforts ended in failure. The development of grain varieties that matured at the Rampart station guaranteed an economical local feed source for dairy herds in the Interior. Georgeson's dream of strawberries and cream came true before he retired.

Georgeson battled constantly for funding to carry out his work and provide for his employees. The 1898 budget for the Alaska district totalled $5,000. By 1900, Georgeson had a budget of $12,000 but he was supporting three experiment stations. Members of the Committee on Agriculture felt $12,000 was enough or perhaps even too much. Many people both in Alaska and in the contiguous states doubted the possibility of agriculture in Alaska. Georgeson went to Washington to address the committee only to be told "It's no use, your coming before this committee for a hearing. Your appropriation is twelve thousand dollars a year, and we're not going to allow you another cent."

Lack of money continued to be a problem even after he received increased funding. Once an Indian cut off Rampart station Superintendent George Gasser's finger. He went to the nearest doctor, an army physician, in Tanana for treatment. The bill was $90. When Gasser presented Georgeson with the bill, Georgeson refused to pay. He claimed that experiment station personnel were federal employees. They received no other benefits so the army could pay this bill. Georgeson was a master at getting his money's worth. Gasser felt Georgeson hired all Kansas State men because they knew "how to work hard long hours from dawn to dusk."

Georgeson became an advocate for Alaska. He wrote 47 books, pamphlets, and circulars about the state and its agricultural potential. He published in popular magazines like the *National Geographic* in addition to Alaska Agricultural Experiment Station publications. "Alaska has been maligned, abused, and totally misunderstood," wrote Georgeson.

Georgeson was a vocal supporter of both homesteading and the immigration of Finlanders. He believed that since the Finns were used to the similar climates of Finland, they would adapt to Alaska and benefit the United States. Georgeson believed the biggest hindrance to settlement of the territory was the difficulty in obtaining land. It was very expensive to survey land and 80 acres was not enough to make a living in the Alaskan climate. In a 1902 testimony before the Committee on Public Lands at the House of Representatives, Georgeson argued eloquently for an increase from 80-acre to 320-acre homesteads. "Alaska can furnish homesteads of 320 acres each to 200,000 families." said Georgeson. Eventually he won his point and Alaskan homesteads were enlarged.

It is evident from his writings that Georgeson never doubted Alaska's potential for a great future in agriculture. Georgeson was convinced that Alaska could become a world leader in agriculture because of the land Alaska had to offer.

That potential still exists today. Great strides have been made in the development of new varieties that produce well in Alaska and the land is still there. It just waits for the correct economic climate. Then we will see Georgeson's vision for his adopted land come true. ❑

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