

High Plains Horticulture: A History

John F. Freeman. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008. 296pp. Illus. Maps. Notes. Biblio. Ind. Cloth, \$34.95.

This book is a hymn to human ingenuity and persistence. Anyone who has tried to farm or garden on the Great Plains, or who has studied the history of the plains, knows the difficulties the environment poses for plant life introduced from elsewhere. John F. Freeman tells the story of those who tried to grow fruits, vegetables, and ornamental plants in an inhospitable place, the "high plains" of western Nebraska and Kansas, the eastern portion of Colorado, southeastern Wyoming, and southwestern South Dakota.

Freeman loves this region; from an early age he hoped to live on the plains, and he did so, spending much of his career in public service in Wyoming. He also respects the "civilizing influence of horticulture" (p. ix) as a means of creating and beautifying community and maintaining ties to nature and the soil. The story he tells begins with American Indian plantings of corn, pumpkins, and beans and ends with the modern emphasis on xeriscaping, gardening that utilizes water-conserving native plants, and the organized, systematic, modern approach to "green," urban gardening now popular in the Denver area.

High Plains Horticulture provides many kinds of information. In highly readable prose, Freeman tells a detailed, interesting story of the many people who worked to bring plants of all kinds to the plains. For example, Niels Hansen, South Dakota State College's well-known alfalfa man, traveled the world looking for crops that farmers could grow successfully in South Dakota. Less well known is his work with fruits and ornamental plants. Hansen called himself a "plant inventor" and spent years grafting fruits, breeding hardy strawberries (never terribly successfully), and importing foreign plants

that might serve well in the plains environment. A plant whose seeds he imported from Russia, the Siberian Pea Shrub, makes up the outer ring of many farm windbreaks today.

Aven Nelson, originally an English professor who became the Wyoming Agricultural Experiment Station botanist in 1890, had the most difficult struggle of all, because he promoted "community horticulture" in a state owned by the cattle ranchers. His story was one of struggle against inertia and the "powers that be," as well as the climate. Charles Bessey, the noted Nebraska botanist, oversaw the identification of native flora in Nebraska and promoted tree planting, in addition to other horticultural endeavors. He also directed experiments in tree-planting in the unique environment of the Sandhills. A local landowner agreed to plant twenty-thousand conifers on his land, some in cultivated soil, others in untouched grass. The experiments demonstrated that trees could grow on uncultivated lands—fifty percent survived. Ten years later, those conifers, with no human care, were nearly twenty feet tall. On cultivated land, ninety-five percent of the trees died.

Freeman details the backgrounds, intellectual foundations, and botanical labors for each of the scientists who appear in this volume. He also tells the broader history of water law, dry-farming, the local seed industry, community beautification, especially in Denver, and many other topics related to horticulture and efforts to civilize the plains through plants. The author warns the reader at the start that "this study purports to be a cultural, not scientific or technical, treatment of horticulture" (p. viii). It is wonderfully that—a wide-ranging book that nonscientists can read and enjoy, and one that lovers of the Great Plains can savor.

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