

Reissue of Natural Landscaping Classic

Reflections for Today's Restorationists

American *Plants for American Gardens* by Dr. Edith Roberts and Elsa Rehmann was originally published in 1929 by the MacMillan Company. Its recent re-publication by the University of Georgia Press provides an opportunity to reflect on an earlier era in the evolution of ecosystem restoration—a time before anyone called it that.

The book is a compilation of 12 articles originally published in *House Beautiful* magazine from 1927 to 1928 under the heading of "Plant Ecology." Each chapter includes a discussion of the botanical composition and aesthetic characteristics of a specific plant community type. These community types include the open field, the juniper hillside, the oak woods, and the maple-beech-hemlock woods. Roberts and Rehmann provide comprehensive plant lists and suggest how key elements of these communities might be incorporated into residential landscapes either through protection of the existing vegetation or through re-introduction of appropriate native species in community-like assemblages. While they wrote these chapters for a popular audience, this work had (and still has) relevance beyond the garden wall.

The authors brought to this book complementary educational backgrounds that served them well. Dr. Roberts began her graduate studies in plant ecology under the renowned ecologist Henry C. Cowles at the University of Chicago in 1911. She received her doctorate there in 1915. Ms. Rehmann studied landscape architecture at the Lowthorpe School in Groton, Massachusetts—an institution devoted "exclusively to training women for the profession of landscape architecture." The curriculum at Lowthorpe incorporated plant science, including hands-on experience with growing a wide variety of plant species, along with planting design.

American Plants for American Gardens includes insights gained by Dr. Roberts during the development of a 1.6-hectare (4-acre) ecology garden at Vassar College in the 1920s (see *R&MN* 8(2):83). This effort, while small in scale, incorporated elements of ecosystem restoration. Dr. Roberts (1933) noted that a central objective in establishing the "ecological laboratory" was to establish native plants "in their correct associations, with the appropriate environmental factors of each association in this region." She also observed that the work done in the ecology laboratory, primarily by students, generated scientific data that she



Anticipating the ideas of restorationists two generations later, authors Edith Roberts and Elsa Rehmann encouraged their readers to study the wildflowers of uncultivated fields and "catch the manner of their natural assembly." This drawing of a farmhouse surrounded by meadows and hillsides illustrated their article, "The Open Field," in the September, 1927 issue of *House Beautiful*.

used while writing *American Plants for American Gardens* even though, as she noted, "The material was presented in a popular manner for the purpose of interesting the general public in constructive conservation and ecological methods."

The ecological laboratory at Vassar was but one expression of the interest in using native plant communities during the first three decades of the 20th century in the United States. Perhaps the best known and best documented work of this genre was that of the Prairie Landscape School, which had its philosophical center in the Chicago area. The Danish-born landscape architect, Jens Jensen is probably the best-known practitioner of this landscape style. Jensen studied and used the elements of the naturally-evolved landscapes of the upper Midwest as the basis for his distinctive landscape designs. His frequent companion on forays into natural areas around the Chicago was none other than Dr. Cowles, Edith Roberts's major professor.

Others who were closely associated with the preservation and restoration of native landscapes include Ossian Cole (O.C.) Simonds and Wilhelm Miller in the upper Midwest, and Frank Waugh in Massachusetts. In 1927, the venerable Olmsted Brothers landscape architectural firm in Brookline, Massachusetts, designed a "wild garden and native plant preserve" for the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park. Their design incorporated native associations of plants into a series of microhabitats that included shaded woodlands, dry granite rock outcroppings, and wet meadows.

Unfortunately, the strong current of interest in linking ecological principles with the practices of landscape design and management diminished to a trickle from the 1940s through the 1960s. Only in the last 25 years has there been a renewal of this philosophy, emerging under various labels from "designing with native habitats" to "ecosystem restoration." We would do well, as we propose to educate a new generation of designers and restorationists, to learn from such early proponents as Edith Roberts and Elsa Rehmann. Their useful book grew out of sound ecological understanding, extensive field observations, and hands-on experience combined with a sensitivity to the beauty of the natural or restored native landscape.

American Plants for American Gardens by Edith Roberts and Elsa Rehmann with foreword by Darrel Morrison. 1996. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press. Cloth, \$27.95. ISBN: 0-82003-1851-5.

References

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