**BOOK REVIEW**


*Jewels of the Plains*, which carries the subtitle “Wildflowers of the Great Plains, Grasslands and Hills,” is one of those delightful one-of-a-kind books that defies classification. It is neither a flora, a wildflower guide, nor a checklist, though it partakes of elements of each. It is at once less and more than those categories. Less, because it does not treat all species known in the area covered, relatively few of the species that are covered are illustrated, and there is no formal means of identification. More, because the sections devoted to each species—or group of species—although including some descriptive elements, are more concerned with conveying a visual and emotional impression of the plant as one comes across it in its native habitat. Taking all these accounts in their totality, the book evokes the wonder and beauty of the plant life of the Great Plains, extending from southern Canada to northern Texas.

The first edition was published in 1983, shortly after the author’s death in his 95th year. Claude Barr was born near Bentonville, Arkansas, in 1887. In the early years of the twentieth century, he settled in the southwestern corner of South Dakota, where he bought a homestead and eventually, in 1932, established a nursery that he operated for several decades. Over the years, he explored the plant life of the Great Plains and brought many Plains species into cultivation. He issued a regular catalogue to customers describing the ever-increasing number of species he offered through his nursery, and, along the way, published numerous articles in the horticultural literature. He had been planning *Jewels of the Plains* for many years, but work on it went slowly as a result of the burden of running the nursery and, at the same time, his active ranch. He realized by 1965 that if he continued in this fashion, the book would never be written. He had already sold his cattle and, at this time, he closed his nursery business, except for the sale of seeds, and devoted the rest of his years to finishing the book. The loss to his customers is well compensated by the gain to the rest of us, who now have the fruits of Mr. Barr’s unique and devoted interpretation of the plant life of the Great Plains.

Perhaps the best way to convey the flavor of Mr. Barr’s writing is to reproduce some snippets: Under “Cirsium. Thistle,” he writes:

Anyone who admires the wide, symmetrical, light rose-purple heads of thistles can well attempt to grow *Cirsium undulatum*, which ranges over the length of the Plains. . . . Its flower is one of the more beautiful wildflowers. . . . Foliage and stem are a harmonious gray green. Leaves have classic undulant margins, and all leaf extremities, stems, and involucres are well armed with stiff and sharp spines. . . . With its free but not troublesome stolonizing, new
rosettes appear here and there each year, though the original rosette dies after it has produced one to several fine flowers.

*Delphinium geyeri* is described as “arresting in the intensity and depth of its textured blueness.” For the fetid marigold, the author writes “I hesitate to disclose the common name of . . . *Dyssodia papposa* because it denotes prejudice. . . . [It] is listed here to apprise . . . lovers of marigold fragrance that an inconspicuous . . . underfoot plant has provided a reminiscent whiff.” *Viola adunca* is said to be a “quizzical little old man in deep blue” that “accepts the environment of Prairie Gem Ranch with charming grace.” The blazing-star, *Liatris lancifolia* “dons its Tyrian raiment and commands attention in August.” The bush morning-glory, *Ipomoea leptophylla*, “appears as a bold, loose mound of arching, tapering stems with lance-linear leaves,” and, “[f]rom June to August come ample trumpets of subdued rose purple, . . . a welcome sight.”

These gems go on for nearly 200 pages, treating the plants in alphabetical order by genus, including not only the descriptive language already sampled above, but also accounts of the garden value of each genus and species. Thus, this book is of value both to the botanical traveler through the Plains and to the native plant gardener.

The editor of the revised edition, James H. Locklear (who is the director of the Lauritzen Gardens in Omaha, a well-known horticulturist, and himself the author of an equally delightful book that is a comprehensive and authoritative survey of all 61 species of Phlox) has very lightly edited Barr’s original text, primarily limited to updating the nomenclature, helpfully indicating the changes in square brackets. In addition, he has provided an illuminating introduction, added a series of notes, and updated the already extensive bibliography, which includes, *inter alia*, all of Claude Barr’s own publications. He has also replaced most of the color plates of the original with new ones (often of different species). Retained in the revised edition are the forward by H. Lincoln Foster, the author’s extensive introduction, and a closing essay on the Great Plains plants in the wild and in the garden, a short essay by Ronald R. Weedon on the botanical contributions of the author, and a glossary and index (the latter updated by the editor).

This book is warmly recommended to all who rejoice in the plant life of the Great Plains or who appreciate fine writing that conveys personal observations of and experiences with those plants.

——Michael Huft

---