Book review

Barn had role in primroses' history

by IRENE BRADFIELD
Special to The Post

Gardening and Beyond, by Florence Bellis (Timber Press, Portland, $19.959

Many local people will remember Florence Levy Bellis's famous primrose nursery at Barnhaven. Those people, along with gardeners and book lovers, will enjoy this book.

Those who remember that Barnhaven on Johnson Creek off Dowsett Lane became the world's top primrose nursery will also remember Bellis and her special talent for growing things.

This industrious, introspective woman worked quietly for 30 years as a mail-order wholesaler and retailer specializing in primroses and received visitors from all over the world.

Just as quietly, she wrote "Gardening and Beyond," a work as lyrically beautiful as her primroses.

Bellis now lives in Lincoln City. She tends a garden that overlooks the ocean, taking time to walk the beach and appreciate at leisure the seen and unseen wonders of our planet. But when you pick up her book, don't expect it to be an account of her adventures at Barnhaven or a history of the American Primrose Society, which she co-founded. Bellis was also founding editor of the American Primrose Society publication.

Her book has a coastal setting, yet ranges far and wide both geographically and philosophically. Barnhaven is remembered lovingly with emphasis on the knowledge gained there about Earth's laws. The book is written in simple, crystal-clear language as much for the home gardener as for the specialist.

The illustrations, done by Valerie Willson, a graphic artist and the author's granddaughter, fit gracefully into the text, guiding the browser from topic to topic. It has been given the place of honor as volume one in the nature and artifice series, with Richard L. Critz as general editor.

At Barnhaven from the 1930s to the 1960s, Bellis taught herself the intricacies of breeding primroses. She simplified and advanced known methods of hybridizing and seeding, in the process revolutionizing accepted practices.

Her technique of hand pollination, previously untried, produced the Barnhaven strains and originations that brought fame and a devoted following.

If you search carefully in her book, you'll be able to piece together the story of her first purchase of seed packets advertised in an English catalog and her dream of enhancing the muted primrose

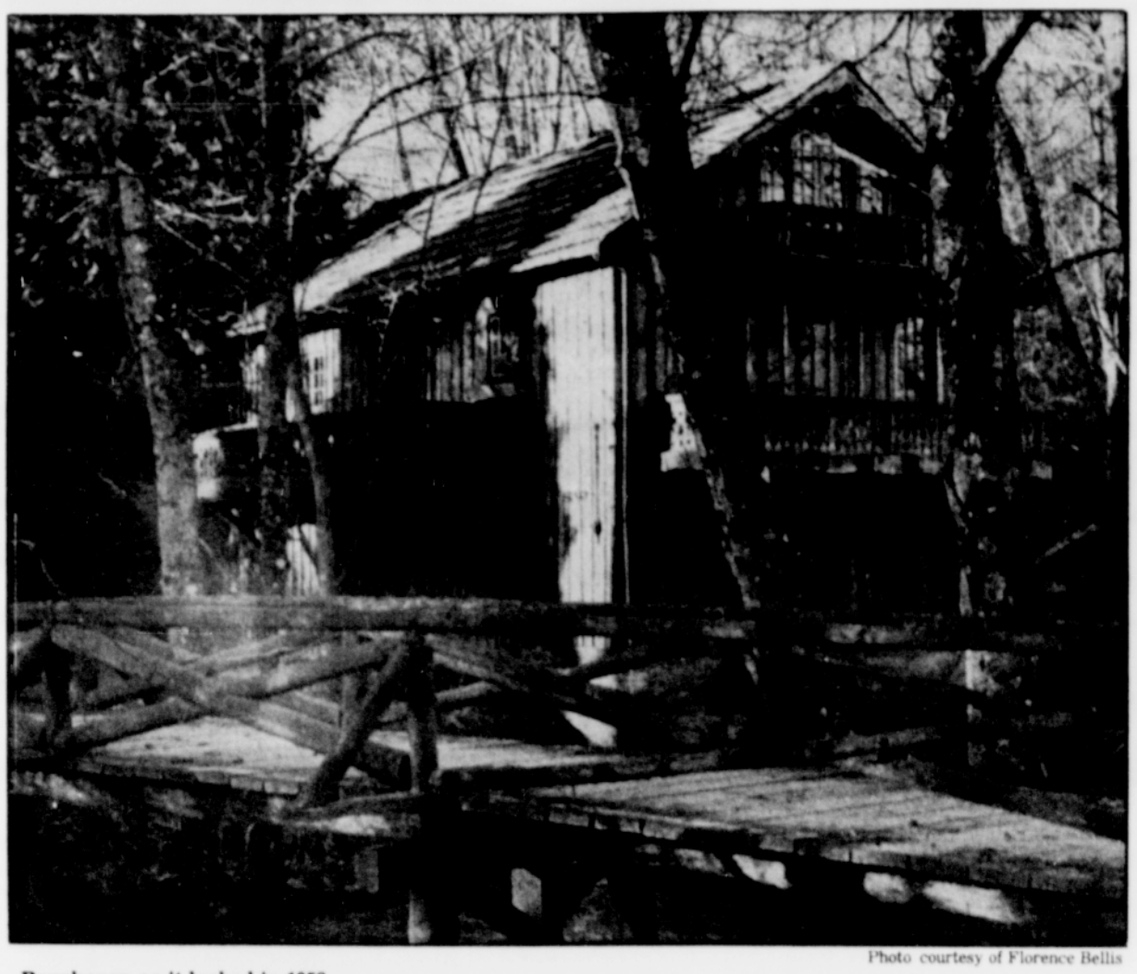

Photo courtesy of Florence Bellis

Barnhaven as it looked in 1958.

colors of those days. There were only dull reds, bronzes, whites and pale yellows, but she yearned for brighter hues. One day she pulled a bloom in half and discovered the secret of hand pollination.

Under her deft hands, those first few imported shades grew to the present 140, the widest color range of any flower in horticultural history. The dull reds became her Indian Reds, the muted bronzes the Grand Canyon series, the reddish purples Marine blue, the pale yellows harvest yellow. She named the whites winter white for the sparkling snow.

Bellis attributes this love affair with color to her "broken engagement" with music. Born in New Orleans, she had trained to be a concert pianist. She was active in music and theater in Portland but hard times came in the form of the Depression.

She soon found herself in Gresham with only two pianos, a husband and a hayloft home in an old barn. The barn belonged to Arthur Dowsett and required extensive remodeling to make it fit for human habitation. Bellis and her husband, with the Dowsetts' help, found timbers that could be used for flooring in an old theater, set in doors and windows, and patched the roof.

Bellis was able to put away the umbrellas that protected her grand piano and turn her attention to earning a living. As it turned out, her future was in horticulture, not music. She says in chapter 12 that insight she gained later brought the realization that her obsession with color for her primroses was compensation for her lost music "since tone is color heard, and color is tone seen."

In the chapter "The Miracle of Unseen Help," she speaks of single-cell creatures that live in the soil. "Call them bacteria if you like," she says, "but I call them the families of the soil."

As these families work non-stop to feed themselves and the multi-cell life we see above ground, the combined effort "completes the hub around which the Master Plan revolves."

Home gardeners will enjoy the clear descriptions of how to prepare the garden, why it may be a good idea to mix ornamental plants with vegetables, advice on growing techniques, and discussions about humus and compost. Along with all this gardening good sense are travel anecdotes and intimate glimpses into the lives and thoughts of such horticultural giants as Gregor Mendel and Luther Burbank. This leads back to her own creative methods, including the secret of a simple additive in her watering can that causes friends and neighbors to exclaim over the growth and abundance of her plants.

Through the years, Barnhaven evolved into a charming Swiss chalet where Bellis received her exotic visitors, not presiding sedately over tea, but sliding them down hillsides, sometimes in the rain, to show her splendid blooms.

The chalet still exists, but another family, Richard and Ann Anderson, now lives there. The greenhouses and the fields of primroses under the apple trees are gone. Famous Americans, Buddhist monks and Hungarian counts no longer visit. And the primroses have been given back to Britain.

In 1966, Bellis turned the business over to Jared and Syliva Sinclair, who live in a 17th century house in Kendall on Lake Windemere in England's lake district. The Sinclairs plan to curtail their operation of Barnhaven II this year, but the tradition will continue with the support of long-time friends throughout the world. One friend in particular who lives on the Oregon coast wishes them well in celebration of the Barnhaven she originated in Gresham 50 years ago.

Thinning improves fruit

Improving the quality of developing fruit on backyard fruit trees is mostly a matter of taking a bit of the load off tree limbs. It's called thinning.

Every growing season apple and pear trees set so much fruit that it's unlikely that all of it will mature to a high level of quality, says Ray McNeilan, Oregon State University Extension home gardening agent.

In addition all the fruit the tree sets will add a lot of extra weight to tree limbs and may crack or break them in the process, he says.

The solution is to remove or thin out some of the fruit. Removing misshapen or diseased fruit is a good way of improving the quality of the remaining fruit on the tree.

Besides these benefits, thinning will help the tree keep setting fruit at a uniform rate season after season.

Apples are borne on short shoots called spurs. Those spurs that bear apples this year won't bloom next spring.

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Tips provided for control of wasps and yellow jackets

Nosy yellow jackets and other wasps can make summer outings a real pain.

Barbecues and picnics tend to attract these pests, especially if they have nests near the area where the activity is taking place.

These stinging insects can be more than a mere annoyance, says Ray McNeilan, Oregon State University Extension home gardening agent.

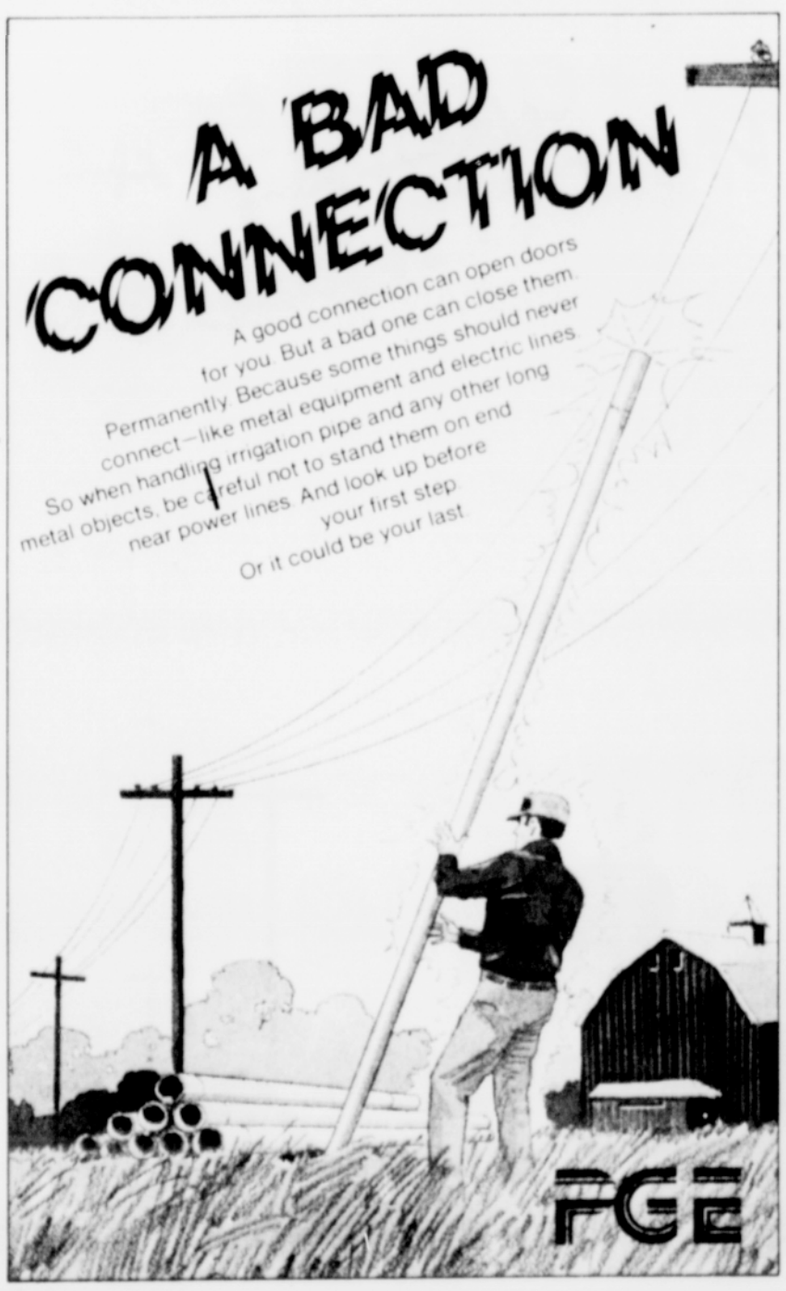
Their sting can cause allergenic reactions in some people, and even death to people who are allergic to wasp or yellow-jacket stings.

Wasps, unlike bees, can sting many times. Bees sting only once because they leave the stinger in the person or animal attacked.

Wasps commonly nest in trees, large bushes, on building exteriors, in spaces in walls, on roofs, and in small holes in the ground, says McNeilan. Nests may be made of mud or paper, depending on the type of wasp. Paper nests as large as a basketball have been found in shrubs and trees around home landscapes.

Control of these pests involves the use of insecticides or traps. Insecticides registered for wasp contron usually contain Sevin, diazinon or pyrethrin. Several of these products are sold in pressurized cans; other are available as wettable powders or liquids from which a spray can be prepared.

Nests should be treted after dark when the wasps have retired for the night.



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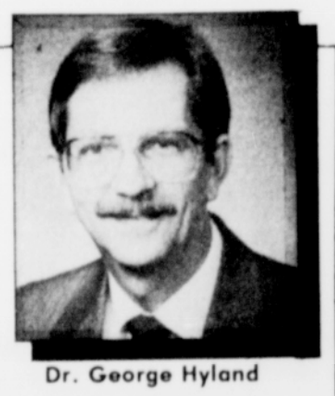
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