Edie’s Love of Plants

George L. Smith

By the time Edith (Edie) Hadle was 10 or 12 years old she was digging up everything from Red Cedar to Buffalograss and planting them around the house in Kingman County, Kansas. "I became fascinated with plants as a child so I was hooked on them a long time ago," she recalls.

This Soil Conservation Service technician admits, "I guess I have always looked at plants, including forbs, from an ornamental point of view, first." And she took that view with her to Kansas State University where she enrolled in Ornamental Horticulture on the G.I. Bill following service in the Army as a medical lab technician during World War II.

"A professor at KSU told us native forbs are respectable, that they are beautiful, and that we didn’t have to call them weeds. That was when I started roaming the rangeland around Manhattan collecting and studying the many native plants, including forbs," she says. Her feeling that native forbs are not all weeds has never changed. So, what is a forb? Edie’s definition is more of what a forb is not, rather than what it is. A forb, she says, is a non-woody, non-grassy, herbaceous plant. They have been an important part of her entire life, both privately and professionally.

Although Edie did not have quite enough credit hours to receive her BS degree, she did receive her MRS degree when she married Fred Hadle. That was followed by new careers as homemaker and mother. In 1951 her husband joined the KSU faculty as superintendent of the Horticulture Farm. That move provided ample opportunity to keep her green thumbs busy. Her major project was the development of an ornamental garden at the hort farm 400 feet long and 20 to 50 feet wide where she had an extensive collection of plants. "I tried to create a situation similar to what the plants had grown in naturally," she explains. So her ornamental garden had a pond, a bog area and a rocky area. "It was fun," she says, "and the area attracted a lot birds and animals ranging from snails to deer."

The KSU hort farm, where the Hadles lived for 22 years, is located south of Manhattan on the Kansas River and is near the USDA, SCS Plant Materials Center (PMC). In 1967 the manager of the PMC asked Edie to come to work for the SCS as a clerk-typist. "I wasn’t very excited about going to work as a typist but I have always been conservation minded so working for the SCS would be in keeping with that," she explains. But Edie soon found she did not enjoy working inside. "Fortunately, the manager discovered that plants were really my thing. He lacked the time for taking notes for plant evaluations so pretty soon I was doing them because I like to. Actually, I was in a dual position until 1975 when I was made a fulltime technician. You might say that suddenly I was being paid for working with my hobby," she says.

The purpose of the Plant Materials Center is to assemble grasses, legumes, forbs, trees and shrubs, and evaluate them. The desirable ones are increased for use in range seeded, watershed cover, critical areas, wildlife habitat and other conservation purposes. Edie’s day-to-day responsibilities include doing a lot of those evaluations. She can be seen, with clip board in hand, measuring plants for height, width and spread, and taking visual ratings. Measurements and observations are recorded and the numbers are done up fashionably for a computer. She explains that the initial evaluation of plant materials includes: germination and seedling vigor; rate and season of growth; seed habits and yield; disease and insect resistance; cold and drought tolerance; and forage production. Edie has some 1,500 grasses and forbs under her tender-loving-care, which makes record keeping mountainous by most standards.

"We have grown as many as 200 different species of forbs here at the Center and we may have a couple of hundred different plantings of one species. The purpose is to try to find half a dozen plants that do better than all the rest. When we find them they are increased, then field tested and released," she explains. Edie does the mechanics of record-keeping on the plants and there is a lot of it. The plant science staff makes the selections.
Edie Hadle explaining steps in the development of improved plant materials with a wall chart.

Edie Hadle making inventory of seed in the seed warehouse

Since Edie's work is, essentially, the search for unusual plants, it follows that she likes to work from seeds. "That's my big fascination, growing plants from seed because that's where you can get the variation. If you buy something from a nursery you know what it's going to be, or supposed to be, if you maintain good conditions for it. Or, you can take cuttings and you know you are going to get the same thing. But with seeds there is always the chance for something new and different," she says. A good example is a Creeping Veronica which Edith had for 20 years. "I just popped up from a packet of seed and it was really different," she adds.

Forbs are weeds to many people. So, when asked if she would place forbs in the same category as cactus, coyotes and rattlesnakes because they survive without many friends, she replies, "Yes, because most farm homemakers I know consider forbs to be weeds, plants out of place. But, there are many that look nice in the yard if put in a totally sunny location. Do not try to grow most of them close to the house or in shaded areas," she advises. "I have a little wild petunia that grows beautifully around the base of evergreens in our yard and it blooms all summer long," she adds.

Many of Edie's extra-curricular activities center around her love for plants and she is willing to share. She was the first counselor for girls at the annual Kansas Range Youth Camp sponsored by the Kansas Chapter of the Society for Range Management of which she is a member. "I did that for 7 years and it was fun working with the girls on plant identification from morning until 9 at night."

She is also a member of the Kansas Wildflower Society. "I really got hooked on prairie wild flowers and I don't know how much time I have spent roaming the hills collecting them, but I have had a quite a few different species," she says.

In winter, when her thousands of plants are dormant, Edie fills seed orders at the PMC. Another chore that goes with the job is the cultivation of her plots. "I've done my share of hoeing over the years," she says, but referring to herself now as a "short timer," Edie will soon hang up her SCS hoe. She and her husband plan to retire at the end of this year (1983). "We are going to make all those repairs around the house that I have let go, and fix up the yard. But my pet project is to go to Alaska. I have wanted to see that part of the world for 40 years."

Edie, have a good trip.

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