

Alaska Women's Hall of Fame

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Verna E. Pratt 1935–

Achievement In: Educating Alaskans about their native plants and wildflowers

Verna Pratt was raised in a big family on a small farm in Massachusetts. The flowers in her mother's large garden fascinated her as did the wildflowers she found while wandering through the surrounding fields. Part of her fascination was that the plants "stayed still" and could be closely observed. This early interest led Pratt to become a self-educated, amateur botanist who not only has shared her extensive knowledge with generalists in Alaska, but is a recognized, internationally known expert in Alaska's native plants, wildflowers and berries. Though as a child Pratt was painfully shy, as a teacher, she is friendly, modest and generous; eager to share her knowledge and enthusiastic about helping others to learn what she knows. Pratt, whose expertise has been achieved through self-study and dedication, knows firsthand how difficult it is to learn something new and considers that her greatest accomplishment is that she has helped someone to learn about Alaska's native plants, wildflowers and berries.

With her husband, Frank, in the military, they lived in a variety of locations throughout the country and, in each location, Pratt studied the local plant life and created flower gardens. Arriving in Alaska in 1966 she began to teach herself about the Alaska native plants but found little to guide her. With her "hobby" turning into an "obsession," Frank realized that if he wanted to spend any time with his wife, he needed to join her on her trips. He decided to photograph the wildflowers she was trying to observe and learn about. The only materials available were big, heavy scientific books with inadequate black-and-white drawings which were very difficult to use in the field for identification. Frustrated by how difficult it was to learn about Alaska's plants from such books, Pratt and her husband, without any prior experience, decided to write and publish a guidebook for the Alaska generalist interested in learning about native plants. They decided the guidebook had to meet three stipulations: good color photographs, scientifically correct text and stitched binding to insure the book would not fall apart after heavy use in the field. Pratt then made a creative and key decision: to organize the plants by color; not scientific classification. This decision provided a new, easy way for a novice to learn about plants, their similarities, differences and, above all, to appreciate their beauty.

Pratt's job was to write the text, choose the photographs she or Frank had taken and, using an artistic sensibility learned in her public school art classes, design and do the layout of each page and the book as a whole. Frank's job was to research, learn and use an appropriate software program to make the book "camera ready" for overseas printing. After much hard work, the "Field Guide to Alaskan Wildflowers Commonly Seen Along Highways and Byways" was published in 1989. This was followed in 1991 by "Wildflowers Along the Alaska Highway, Wildflowers of Denali National Park" in 1993, "Alaska's Wild Berries and Berry-Like Fruit" in 1995, and in 2003, "Travel Notes for the Wildflower Enthusiast," for drawing and field notes. Upon discovering that there were no suitable books on the market which introduced children to

the plants of the forest and meadow, Pratt and her husband wrote and published “Linnaea’s World,” a children’s book, in 1996.

Pratt has shared her expert knowledge in a variety of other ways and venues as well, from teaching classes to leading field trips to conducting formal lectures. Her leadership of field trips has earned her the title of “mountain goat” from her friends and students due to her agility in navigating difficult terrain in search of that one elusive wildflower. She has conducted classes through the Anchorage Community Schools program, been an adjunct lecturer at the University of Alaska Anchorage in the Alaska Wilderness Studies Program and continues to lead Alaska Geographic Society field trips at the Murie Science and Learning Center in Denali National Park and Preserve and at the Portage Visitor Center. She has taught at the Alaska Botanical Gardens and in the Anchorage public schools. As a recognized expert, she was invited to speak at the Long Island, New York, chapter of the North American Rock Garden Society in 1991 and in 2001 lectured on Alaska wildflowers to the International Rock Garden Plant Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland.

Pratt has long been a leader in the Anchorage gardening community and beyond. In 1982 she and her husband founded the Alaska Native Plant Society and she served as its first president from 1982-88. In 1997 she founded the Alaska Chapter, North American Rock Garden Society and also served as its first president. She holds memberships in the Wildflower Garden Club and the Alaska Master Gardeners Association. Pratt participates directly in the local community in other ways as well – by helping to care for and maintain the gardens at the Alaska Botanical Garden, Campbell Creek Science Center and she volunteers as one of the Weed Warriors with the Alaska Native Plant Society.

Pratt has received local, statewide and national honors and recognition for her contributions to educating the public about Alaska’s native plants and wildflowers. In 1991, and again in 1993, she received the Helen S. Hull Literary Award from the National Council of State Garden Clubs for “literary production of horticultural interest” and in 1999 she received the Meritorious Service Award for “producing books to help people learn.” In 2000 she was honored locally as a Woman of Achievement by the Anchorage YWCA and in 2002 was elected to the (national) board of directors, North American Rock Garden Society. Pratt also is a recipient of the Edgar T. Wherry Award given by the North American Rock Garden Society (date unknown) for “outstanding contribution in the dissemination of botanical and/or horticultural information about native North American plants.” In 2009 Pratt and her husband were the first persons awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Anchorage Chapter of the Alaska Master Gardeners Association. On that occasion, it was humorously pointed out that they were being recognized: “For your ability to teach and teach and teach and run up mountains with people following you.” Anchorage garden columnist Jeff Lowenfels perhaps best summarizes Pratt’s reputation and contribution to knowledge about Alaska’s native plants and wildflowers in these words: “In the wildflower world around the country, everybody knows Verna Pratt,” and “if you want a book on wildflowers in Alaska, this (the first field guide) is the one you get, period.”

References

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