



Friends of the Central Experimental Farm

Spring 2020 Newsletter

Volume 32 No. 2

Who was Isabella Preston?

By Maura Giuliani



R. Hinchcliff

Preston lilacs in the collection at the Ornamental Gardens.

World famous among early twentieth century horticulturists, Isabella Preston (1881-1964) was the first female hybridist in Canada. She is very much a part of Canada's ornamental plant history and left us a patrimony of beautiful new flowers and trees. Miss Preston lived and worked quietly at the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa for many years, but earned an international reputation as a plant breeder.

Isabella Preston began hybridizing ornamental plants at the Central Experimental Farm 100 years ago this May.

Born in England during the reign of Victoria, Isabella Preston grew up in a comfortable, middle-class household. Her parents were enthusiastic gardeners and her own pleasure in gardens was encouraged. Like many young women of her era, she spent several years in boarding school, learning academic subjects and "household arts." And after her father's death she did, in fact, run the household for her mother and

Continued on Page 3

Survey on Visits to the Farm

Last summer we talked about the need to know more about visitors to the Central Experimental Farm and how they're using its public spaces.

The Central Experimental Farm Advisory Council (CEFAC) has prepared an online survey that will allow this usage to be measured. CEFAC was set up in 1999 to engage the public and provide advice and recommendations to Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in its stewardship role of the Farm. We announced the launch of the survey through Farm Notes and social media but we also want to cast the net wider—even beyond the National Capital Region—so that all visitors and stakeholders have a chance to be heard.

The underlying objective of the survey is to get an unbiased reading of how people interact with the Farm, whether it be on a regular or infrequent basis, and to see if they are affiliated with any group that has a direct link to the Farm. The results can be broken down to show how factors such as affiliation affect people's views about the Farm.

Based on experience, we know that many people see the Farm as an outdoor gym for routine exercise. Others view it as a nature reserve or park. Others still consider the Farm to be a research lab for agriculture and food.



R. Hinchcliff

A visitor to the Preston Heritage Lilac Collection in the Ornamental Gardens.

The Friends of the Farm are members of CEFAC and are of course interested in finding out about people's experience and perceptions of the Farm. In addition, the Friends are planning new projects for the Ornamental Gardens and Arboretum, so this feedback will help guide selection and implementation of projects.

Over time, people's views can change

and it's important to understand how. The Farm's future depends on it. Please help us get feedback through the survey at www.friendsofthefarm.ca

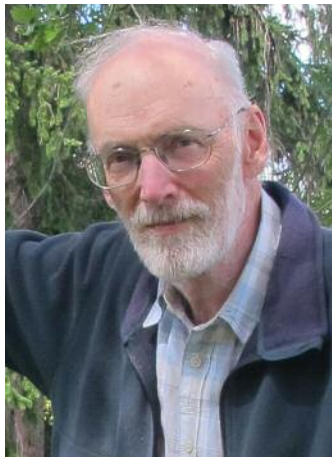
Eric Jones
President

Sondage d'opinion sur les visites à la Ferme

L'été dernier, nous avons discuté de la nécessité d'en apprendre davantage sur les visiteurs à la Ferme expérimentale centrale et de quelle façon ils utilisent ses espaces publics.

Le Conseil consultatif de la Ferme expérimentale centrale (CCFEC) a conçu un sondage en ligne dont les réponses permettront d'évaluer cette utilisation. Le CCFEC a été créé en 1999 afin de mobiliser le public et de fournir des conseils et des recommandations à Agriculture et Agroalimentaire Canada dans son rôle d'intendance de la Ferme. Nous avons annoncé le lancement du sondage dans les *Notes de la Ferme* et dans les médias sociaux. Nous voulions de plus élargir le champ de la recherche pour inclure le plus grand nombre de personnes possible, au-delà même de la région de la capitale nationale, afin de permettre aux visiteurs et intervenants de donner leur opinion.

Le principe sous-jacent de ce sondage repose sur l'intention d'obtenir une opinion libre de parti pris sur la façon dont les visiteurs influent sur la Ferme, que ce soit de manière assidue ou peu fréquente, et pour découvrir également s'ils ont une



affiliation à un groupe ayant un lien direct avec la Ferme. Une fois les résultats désagrégés, il sera possible de démontrer comment une seule variable, comme l'affiliation, peut changer l'opinion des gens au sujet de la Ferme.

Selon notre expérience, nous sommes conscients que pour bon nombre de personnes, la Ferme sert de gymnase

extérieur où y faire de l'exercice physique. Pour d'autres, la Ferme est une réserve naturelle ou un parc. D'autres encore la voient comme un laboratoire ou centre de recherches sur l'agriculture et les produits alimentaires.

Les Amis de la Ferme sont membres du CCFEC et démontrent un intérêt particulier pour les résultats qui seront communiqués sur l'expérience et la perception des gens en rapport avec la Ferme. De plus, ils élaborent actuellement de nouveaux projets relativement aux jardins ornementaux et à l'Arboretum. Cette rétroaction leur servira ainsi de guide dans le choix et la mise en œuvre de ces projets.

Avec le temps, l'opinion des gens peut se modifier, et il est important de comprendre ceci maintenant. L'avenir de la Ferme en dépend. Veuillez nous aider avec vos commentaires en prenant part au sondage ici : www.friendsofthefarm.ca
Merci.

Eric Jones
Président

Who was Isabella Preston? ... (continued from Page 1)

older sister, Margaret, a music teacher. But she also found time for a short course in horticulture at nearby Swansea Horticultural College—the only formal exposure to horticultural education for a woman who would do so much to build up the Central Experimental Farm's plant research program.

She learns to breed plants

The road to her career in plant breeding began in 1912. After the death of their mother, Margaret (who had found a position in Canada as a music teacher), persuaded her sister to go with her to Guelph, Ontario. Guelph had another positive element: the Ontario Agricultural College. Miss Preston enrolled that first fall, taking courses and working in the greenhouses. But taking theoretical courses soon became secondary to working in the greenhouses with Professor J. W. Crow, who was hybridizing fruit trees. Plant breeding was a new science and still relatively informal in Canada, where many interested people were working on expanding the range of winter-hardy plants. Like most of these, Miss Preston was self-taught, learning on the job from Professor Crow and reading up on horticulture and plant breeding in the college library. She first concentrated on lilies, and after several years' work her 'George C. Creelman' lily was recognized as a breakthrough hybrid.

Although her lilies became very well known, the First World War would change the focus of hybridizers to food production. But beginning in the 1920s, Canada's Dominion Experimental Farm service wanted to expand the development of Canadian plant materials that would be better suited to our climate than imports from Great Britain and Europe. While food crops were still of interest, considerable emphasis was laid on researching and breeding ornamentals. The centre of operations of this enterprise was Ottawa, and the program was headed by W. T. Macoun, a well-known and respected horticulturist. He was familiar with Preston's work in Guelph and offered her a change from working with vegetables.

She comes to Ottawa's Farm

Isabella Preston began at the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa in May 1920, at the age of 38. She worked diligently on six different groups of plants identified by Dr. Macoun: lilies, roses, lilacs, Siberian irises, columbines, and crabapples. Because of her lack of formal education, she was initially categorized and paid as a day labourer, despite her background in hybridizing and reputation as a lily expert. Macoun had to create a new position and lobby on her behalf for two years before she was officially appointed as a Specialist in Ornamental Horticulture. He also had to prove there was no qualified man for the job. It was a male domain (see page 8).

Lilacs were an early focus of her work, where the objective was to find cultivars even hardier than those brought from Europe by early settlers, i.e., plants that could survive winters in western Canada. To accomplish this, Miss Preston crossed two Chinese species of lilacs: *Syringa-komarowii* subsp. *reflexa* (with attractive drooping panicles) and *S. villosa* (smaller, erect panicles). The hybrids became known as Preston lilacs, hardy, late-bloomers with semi-pendulous flowers in many shades of purplish pink. Eighty of her late-blooming hybrids are recorded in the *International Lilac Register*, although only about one-half of these were distributed to other institutions or nurseries.

Her work lives on

One hundred years later, her work lives on around the world and still enriches our Ornamental Gardens. Her Rosybloom crabapple trees line Prince of Wales Drive, creating a river of pink blossoms each spring. Her 'Carmenetta' and 'Patricia Macoun' roses can be found in the Heritage Rose Garden. Several of her Siberian irises grace our collection. And in early June, the Preston lilac collection, which has over forty of her



Rosybloom crabapples on Prince of Wales Drive.

R. Hinchcliff



Preston's Stenographer lily 'Brenda Watts'.

Trevor Cole, FCEF Archives

hybrids along with examples of the plants she crossed to create them, are in full flower. When other lilacs in Ottawa have faded, come visit the Farm and enjoy rows of fragrant lilac shrubs still in bloom.

Maura Giuliani has been wandering through and working as a volunteer with the Farm's lilac collection for almost 20 years.

Reference: Edwinna von Baeyer, "The Horticultural Odyssey of Isabella Preston". *Canadian Horticultural History/Histoire de l'horticulture au Canada* 1(3):125-175, 1987.

Celebration Benches

The Celebration Bench Program of the Friends of the Farm has begun with a flourish. Five benches with donor-sponsored plaques were installed in 2019. Four more are to be installed in the Arboretum this spring.

The Friends are now accepting donations for benches to be installed in the Arboretum in the fall of this year. In order to allow time for the benches to be ordered and delivered, our deadline for donors is May 31. Donations made after that and before December 31 will be for 2021 benches.

Further information may be found on the Friends' website at <https://friendsofthefarm.ca/bench-program/> or obtained from the Friends' office.

Upcoming Events

COVID-19 has affected our upcoming events. Please check our website, www.friendsofthefarm, for their current status.

Volunteer Orientation

- Saturday, April 4, at 9:30 am.
- Free admission.
- Location: Building 72, Arboretum.

Annual General Meeting

- Wednesday, May 6, 7 pm – 9 pm.
- Guest speaker will be Tina Liu (*see below*).
- Free admission, membership not required.
- Location: K. W. Neatby Building, Salons A & B, Carling & Maple Drive.

Friends' Plant Sale

- Sunday, May 10, 9 am – 1 pm. (*Rain or shine*)
- Enjoy the offerings of specialty growers and plant vendors.
- Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton will be available with free advice.
- Location: parking lot by K. W. Neatby Building, Carling and Maple Drive.
- Free parking on Maple Drive and in the Observatory parking lot.
- Free admission. Donations to the Friends of the Farm gratefully accepted.

Used Book Sale

- Saturday, June 20 and Sunday, June 21, 10 am to 4 pm.
- Choose from thousands of titles.
- Location: Building 72, Arboretum, CEF. Take the east exit off the Prince of Wales roundabout.
- Free admission and parking available at Building 72.



Victorian Tea

- Sunday, June 28, from 2 to 4 pm.
- Classic tea served under the trees at the Arboretum.
- High tea is \$15, reservations not required.
- More information at friendsofthefarm.ca.



Tina Liu to Talk About Tulips

We are delighted to announce that Tina Liu will give a talk at the Friends of the Farm's Annual General Meeting on May 6 (details above) on "The Tulip Legacy and 75 Years of Tulip Design in Canada's Capital."

As landscape architect for the National Capital Commission, Tina is responsible for plantings around the city, including the spectacular display of tulips in Ottawa each spring. As well as creating innovative displays, she explores ways to enhance pollinator and wildlife habitats and adapt to our changing climate.

It was 75 years ago that the



NCC

Netherlands began sending thousands of tulips to Canada in appreciation of Canada's role in liberating their country during WWII. A special feature of this year's commemoration will be a display of 'Liberation75' tulips from the Netherlands. (You can see 9,000 of these bright orange tulips this spring in the Ornamental Gardens at the Farm.)

All are welcome to come to the meeting. It is not necessary to be a member. Please note that before the speaker there will be a short business meeting of the Friends, at which only members can vote.

Ideas and Tips from Master Gardeners

Here are the 2020 talks by Master Gardeners, to be held from 7 to 9 pm in Building 72, Arboretum. See www.friendsofthefarm.ca/master-gardener-lectures for more information. Individual talks: \$12 for Friends of the Farm members, \$15 for others. Series of five talks: \$50 members, \$60 others.

April 21 – Our Gardens and Climate Change with Diane McClymont Peace.

May 5 – Colour Through the Seasons with Candace Dressler and Rob Stuart.

May 19 – Into the Night Garden with Judith Cox.

September 15 – Another Gardening Year Behind Us with Mary Shearman Reid.

September 29 – A Garden for the Birds with Julianne Labreche.

Volunteering with the Friends of the Farm – A Good Career Move

By Joan Butcher

When Kelsey Cuddihy was looking for full-time work after graduating in 2012 with a Bachelor of Commerce, she decided to counter the job-hunting blues by volunteering. She hoped that this type of activity would give a boost to her resume while allowing her to help out in the community.

The Friends of the Farm were seeking assistance with event planning, and Kelsey had marketing expertise, so it seemed like a good fit. Soon she was providing support to events such as Art on the Farm, the Victorian Tea, the craft sale, the book drop-off and sale, and the 10-Mile Run. Those who volunteered with Kelsey during this time say her cheerful style and kind patience with inexperienced helpers made her a delight to work with.

She also broke ground by establishing a Friends of the Farm social media presence through a Facebook page and a Twitter account. Thanks to her initiative, the Friends can now post and tweet frequently to highlight events, volunteer opportunities, and fundraising goals. Kelsey also used her computer skills to create posters for various Friends' events, and designed brochures for donation and membership campaigns.

As a resident of Ottawa, Kelsey had always known of the Farm, and enjoyed going for runs in the Arboretum. She appreciated Museum visits, which connected her to her family's background in farming. But once she began her volunteer work at the Farm, she realized that she had very little knowledge of how the place was run.

"I had no idea how many volunteer

hours Friends of the Farm puts into helping maintain the various gardens, or the role that the organization plays in preserving the Farm as such a vital part of our city," she said. "And the more time I spent on the Farm, the more I appreciated how lucky the people of Ottawa are to be able to have access to so much green space so close to downtown. This is a rarity in most cities."

Kelsey's analytical skills and marketing knowledge changed the way the Friends did business. By polling attendees, she discovered that the majority of them find out about events on the Farm through signage placed along the Farm roadsides. Now, prior to events, the organization focuses on maximizing the visibility of these signs.

Kelsey likes lending a hand during events. "It's a great time to meet people and there is something really special about seeing a group of people come together to raise funds for a wonderful organization." She especially enjoys the book drop off held every October. "Some would think this is an odd choice, because it is a very physically demanding day, but it is normally lots of laughs plus you get to see fascinating and funny book titles along the way."

When she became an Office Manager at a tech company, Kelsey realized her goal of finding full-time work. Since then she has focused on Human Resources, and currently works remotely with a San Francisco company called Lightbend as a Human Resources & Operations Analyst.

"I really believe my volunteer



Polly McCoil

Kelsey Cuddihy

experience is what helped me to find a position," she says. "My co-workers at the Friends of the Farm were rooting for me and many provided references or sent me job information or contacts along the way. They also cheered me on as I went for interviews and lent an ear when I was frustrated."

Kelsey is always proud to talk about her experience at Friends of the Farm, and has stayed on as a volunteer to help with events. "After an event, I leave with a big smile on my face after meeting friendly and amazingly dedicated individuals."

Gardening and Other Opportunities

Come and enjoy at close quarters our very special Ottawa greenspace. Join the Friends of the Farm's volunteer teams this year in the Ornamental Gardens, Arboretum, and Merivale Shelterbelt.

Gardening begins in early May so get your forms in. To obtain a volunteer form, please visit our website at www.friendsofthefarm.ca/volunteer.htm or call the office at 613-230-3276.

There are also many non-gardening volunteer opportunities that will allow you to apply your skills or learn new ones, working on your own or in a team. Please contact us at volunteer@friendsofthefarm.ca. We hope to see you at the Farm!

In Search of Isabella Preston's Siberian Irises

By Carol MacLeod

The Central Experimental Farm continues to have many of the plants and trees that were painstakingly bred by its own horticulturalists and scientists to suit the Canadian climate and garden conditions – crabapples, lilacs, roses, wheat. The Friends of the Farm team that tends the Iris/Daylily Gardens is particularly proud of the Siberian irises bred by the Farm's legendary horticulturalist, Isabella Preston.

When I joined this team, we were replanting the newly laid out garden. We planted seven Preston Siberian irises, named after Canadian rivers, in an inner circle – 'Abitibi', 'Gatineau', 'Nipigon', 'Ottawa', 'Rideau', 'Rimouski', and 'Skeena'. As an historian, I was attracted to the irises that came with a history, whether it was their status as medal winners or as old irises with a cross-breeding pedigree. I was soon reading Edwinna von Baeyer's article "The Horticultural Odyssey of Isabella Preston," (*Canadian Horticultural History*, 1,3 (1987) pp. 125 - 175) documenting Preston's iris breeding achievements.

I was astonished to learn that Preston had bred 18 Siberian irises, 17 of which were registered with the American Iris Society (AIS), one intermediate bearded iris, and four tall bearded irises. I began a desultory search for the missing irises, as well as information about the parentage of Preston's irises and how some, such as 'Gatineau', have gone on to become proud parents themselves. Then, Richard Hinchcliff found a document among Isabella Preston's papers in the Royal Botanical Garden's (RBG) archives indicating that as late as 1984, the Central Experimental Farm retained all but two of Preston's Siberian irises. Where had they gone?

I began with a review of the AIS listings, a simple Internet name search, and a look at nursery and heritage iris lists. To my dismay, I could find only one, 'Matane', still available in a nursery in Massachusetts. Yes, they could ship one to us, but it involved phytosanitary certification, and it was unavailable that year anyway.

Last year, the Montreal Botanical Garden sent me a list of the irises in its collection. They had one Preston Iris, 'Pickanock'! I found that it had been acquired the same year as Preston registered it, and its description matched that in the AIS records. We agreed to a trade: the garden would send me some



Preston's Siberian iris 'Kenogami' at Sissinghurst

roots and in gratitude I would send them some of a Cleveland Morgan Siberian iris we had, originally bred in Montreal. Done! One Preston iris ticked off the list!

Another "success" has led to interesting correspondence with the head gardener responsible for irises at Sissinghurst, Vita Sackville-West's National Trust garden in the Weald of Kent. I stumbled on a picture of 'Kenogami' in Sissinghurst's Purple Border, where it was surrounded by Dame's Rocket. But the phytosanitary certification process in the European Union is a nightmare, so there is no happy end to this story – yet.

The only other Siberian I have found is 'China Blue', featured in the catalogue of the Shelmardine Garden Centre, a Manitoba nursery near Winnipeg. I haven't been able to confirm that this is one of the Prestons we are missing, but it seems likely because the nursery is not too far from the city of Morden, where there is an Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada experimental research station. Once I have more information about the iris, I'll need

to arrange transport. Fortunately, one of the team has a sister who lives nearby. Or, I have a friend in Winnipeg. Or, I know someone who frequently visits the 'Peg ...

So far, my search has taken me down many a Google rabbit hole! It's a bit hit-and-miss. Needless to say, if any reader has information as to the whereabouts of 'Chaudière', 'Kootenay', 'Madawaska', 'Matapedia', 'Mattawin', 'Pembina', or 'Richelieu', I'd be over the moon!

[If you'd like to read about a really professional plant search, I recommend "The Hunt for a Missing Canadian Lily," the story of the RBG's Alex Henderson's quest for the 'George C. Creelman' lily, bred by Preston in 1916, at www.atlasobscura.com. The quest was ultimately successful.]

Carol MacLeod is a long-time member of the Iris/Daylily Team and "a little cracked" about Siberian irises.

Preston Lilacs

By Maura Giuliani

Preston lilacs (*Syringa × prestoniae*) are Canada's premier contribution to the lilac world. Developed by Isabella Preston during her distinguished career at the Central Experimental Farm (1920-1946), many of them can still be found there.

In 2005 a planting of Preston lilacs was established by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Friends of the Farm. This collection includes not only Isabella's work, but examples of lilacs developed by other originators - in particular, Canadians William A. Cumming, William R. Leslie, and Frank L. Skinner in Manitoba. The

Preston Heritage Collection also encompasses seven *Villosae* species, which have been involved in crosses.

In early to mid-June, these lilacs will be in bloom, long after the *Syringa* hybrids are done. Bred to survive Canadian winters, the Prestons are vigorous plants with pendulous single flowers in colors that range from pink to purple. You might want to check out 'Audrey', 'Isabella', and 'Elinor', cultivars that won Awards of Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society in London, England, in 1939, 1941, and 1951, respectively.



In 2007, 'Isabella' was one of two Canadian lilacs featured on stamps issued by Canada Post.



R. Hinchcliff

'Audrey', one of the award-winning Preston lilacs.



R. Hinchcliff

'Elinor', another award-winner. The long semi-pendulous tubes and small petals are typical of Preston lilacs.

Preston's *Caragana*

By Robert Glendinning

Among the *Caraganas*, or pea shrubs, in the Farm's collection, there is a small unassuming one that at first glance seems much like the others. It is some four feet tall and six feet wide, and records indicate it was planted in 1963. The abundant flowers are a rich orange/yellow. Like all *Caraganas*, this specimen is a tough, hardy plant.

What really makes it interesting, though, is that it is a hybrid between *Caragana aurantiaca* and *C. frutex*, and it was created by Isabella Preston when she worked at the Farm. Its full name is *Caragana × prestoniae* 'Goldensprite'.

When we think of Isabella's plant breeding and hybridization, lilacs, lilies, crabapples, roses, and Siberian Irises usually come to mind, not *Caraganas*.

There is not too much information available about this plant. An Agriculture Canada publication says that it was released to nurseries in 1972. I looked in a few older nursery catalogues without seeing it. If it caught on, its popularity was brief. This is odd, since it has a lot going for it. 'Goldensprite' is hardy, pretty, drought tolerant, and finishes as a relatively compact shrub. It will not be a show shopper in the garden, but will act as

a pretty supporting character.

Two other unnamed *Caragana* hybrids can be found on the Farm grounds, but they do not have the compact habit and the heavy flowering of 'Goldensprite.' Isabella Preston certainly chose the prettiest of the three. This plant is another example of the historic value of our collection. It might be the only 'Goldensprite' out there and is yet another fine example of Preston's plant breeding.

Robert Glendinning is Groundskeeper/ Propagator at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Isabella Preston – An Inspiration

By Edythe Falconer

If you love lilacs, lilies, roses, irises, and crabapple trees, what is special about 2020? It could be Isabella Preston. It is 100 years since she sought a position and was hired at the Central Experimental Farm (CEF), to breed and display ornamental plants in the gardens. Along the way she lived and worked through the struggle for women's suffrage, the Roaring Twenties, the Dirty Thirties, and WWII. During that same period she developed more than 200 hybrids of her favourite plants.

Thousands of workers, including multitudes of volunteers, have worked at the CEF over the last 100 years. All made valuable contributions to the existence and maintenance of this iconic attraction conveniently located in Central Ottawa, and as of 1998, a designated National Heritage Site.

Working in a male-dominated world

Isabella stands proudly among these workers, the well known and not so well known, who have staffed the offices, experimented in the fields, improved livestock health and crop productivity, creating strains that could prosper in our cool climate. The leaders, though, were usually men. That was how it was back then. Women could be employed as stenographers, file clerks, or temporary workers, as was Isabella when she was hired in 1920. With some basic horticultural education in the U.K. and plant breeding experience in Guelph, Ontario, she was eager to practice what she'd learned. Her boss in Ottawa, Dominion Horticulturist W. T. Macoun, gave her the opportunity. She went on to surpass all expectations, becoming respected worldwide as the Queen of Ornamental Horticulture.

An illustration of the male-dominated world was a Privy Council Regulation of June 18, 1920, which stated that "Hereafter no married woman, whose husband is living, shall be eligible for appointment in the Public Service."

That she worked and advanced in a male-dominated world was certainly worthy of recognition. Equally admirable was her work ethic – persistent, patient, detailed, highly productive, and relentlessly creative. Although she is best known for her lilacs, they are not the only flowers and shrubs that she experimented with. She begat numerous floral children and lovingly named them after friends, fellow workers, favourite Shakespearean characters, lakes, rivers, WWII aircraft, and indigenous tribes. Occasionally she was mildly criticized for naming too many of her creations.

Photos of Isabella

Looking at old photographs is often revealing. In an early picture she is posed with her U.K. family including her plant-minded father. Her family sometimes referred to her as their "shy little mouse" and indeed she looks rather timid and tentative. Who could have guessed how far the little mouse would go? When we look into the eyes of our children and grandchildren, do we wonder the same thing?

Another picture is a head shot. At this point her hair appears as a wavy grey over a high forehead. Through spectacles she looks right back at us, unsmiling yet not unfriendly. She wears a simple necklace. In a picture of Isabella in her work clothes she looks equally at ease.

I identify with the one where she is clearly older, complete with wrinkles. She hovers possessively over some lilies – in this case Mr. Slate's 'Yellow Elegance', one of her favourite hybrids.

Prairie connections

Because I come from Saskatchewan where roses grew wild by the roadsides, I have been particularly interested in her work with roses. I wondered if there had been exchanges between Isabella and



Preston family in Lancaster, England, c. 1894.
Isabella is second from the right.



Portrait of Isabella Preston by Arthur Kellett, no date.



Isabella Preston with 'Yellow Elegance' lily, July 1951.

Isabella Preston – An Inspiration ... *(continued from Page 8)*

prairie rose hybridizers of the time – Erskine, Wright, Harp, and Skinner, for example. Felicitas Svejda would follow in her footsteps at the Farm and make her own major imprints on the search for plants, in this case roses, that could handle Canadian winters.

Initially I discovered only one instance of contact with Prairie hybridizers. Frank Skinner, a nurseryman in Dropmore, Manitoba, did travel to the CEF and he and Isabella did meet to discuss their respective projects. They also kept in touch by mail. Skinner was business-oriented but he too worked at breeding new plants, with a view to their marketing possibilities. Skinner roses included ‘Betty Bland’, ‘Isabella Skinner’, and ‘Mossman’. Did Skinner name one of his roses after Isabella to honour her accomplishments in her field and perhaps to attract more buyers? Was Skinner supporting the suffrage movement?

Surely there were other contacts between East and West. Erskine and Wright, talented and self-taught rose hybridizers, were logical possibilities. The Skinner connection was fairly solid, although a little fuss ensued when an enthusiastic Macoun divulged some of Isabella’s methods to Skinner prematurely during a visit to him in Dropmore. Macoun regularly toured the many satellite stations of the CEF and prairie roses were used in hybridization processes, with breeders hoping that their tolerance for cold weather could be passed on.



R. Hinchcliff

Isabella Preston’s ‘Carmenetta’ rose.

100 years later

In 2020, what do we gain in reliving the work and times of Isabella Preston? I believe she can inspire us in our horticultural pursuits, provide an example of quiet determination to reach our goals, and give us a new appreciation of the delicacy, precision, and patience needed

to breed new varieties of our beloved plants. We can all marvel at the amazing work of the “shy little mouse” who rocked the world with her many accomplishments.

Edythe Falconer, a Master Gardener for 20 years, was a Friends of the Farm volunteer in the rose gardens for 11 years.

Isabella Preston’s “Green Fingers”

“I was born in Lancaster, England and educated at private schools. My parents always had a garden and did a great deal of work in it themselves. One of the earliest things I remember is helping my father dig up the potatoes for dinner. When I was older I thought playing tennis was a great waste of time when there was work to do in the garden, so I expect I was born with ‘green fingers.’”



The Friends of the Central Experimental Farm is a volunteer organization committed to the maintenance and protection of the Ornamental Gardens and the Arboretum of the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

The Friends of the Central Experimental Farm publish the Newsletter (ISSN 1702 2762) four times a year (Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall). All members receive the newsletter and it is sent by regular mail or e-mail.

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Reflection

(Isabella Preston thinks back on her work)

Their splendour stills my breath
when I stroll under these trees.
Above, the light on the petals,
like the longer wavelengths
at sunrise and sunset, saturates
the horizon with a radiant blush.

Macoun, in his persuasive way,
had challenged me - create
flowering trees that can endure
the harsh glaze of Ottawa winters,
yet reward us in spring with purple foliage
and abundant, dazzling flowers.

What inspired luck it was!
Or my skill at crossbreeding -
Malus niedzwetzkyana, the Russian crab
(red leafed, red flowered, red fruited),
with Malus baccata, the Siberian crab,
(a sturdy beauty bearing a weave
of arching red-brown branches and buds).

And the patience required of me to hand-pollinate
the blooms. But I was rewarded that fall
with a crop of fat maroon fruit. But then
the despair, on discovering someone
had harvested all but four beyond their reach.
And yet gifted by these few. Their nut-brown seeds
so fertile responded to my careful tending,
sprouted vigorously and with bronze greenery.

And these majestic sprays of bloom
that drift with the wind like waves of water.
This movement made me think of our storied lakes -
Athabasca, Simcoe, Nipissing, released after
months of encrusting snow, and how they break up,
swell, fill up with reflection, the scattering
of spring evenings, the rosybloom sky.

By Blaine Marchand

[For information on the Preston crabapple hybrids referred to in the poem above, see Robert Glendinning's article in the Spring 2018 issue of this newsletter www.friendsofthefarm.ca/newsletters/

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A Garden of Her Own Favourites

By Lynn Armstrong

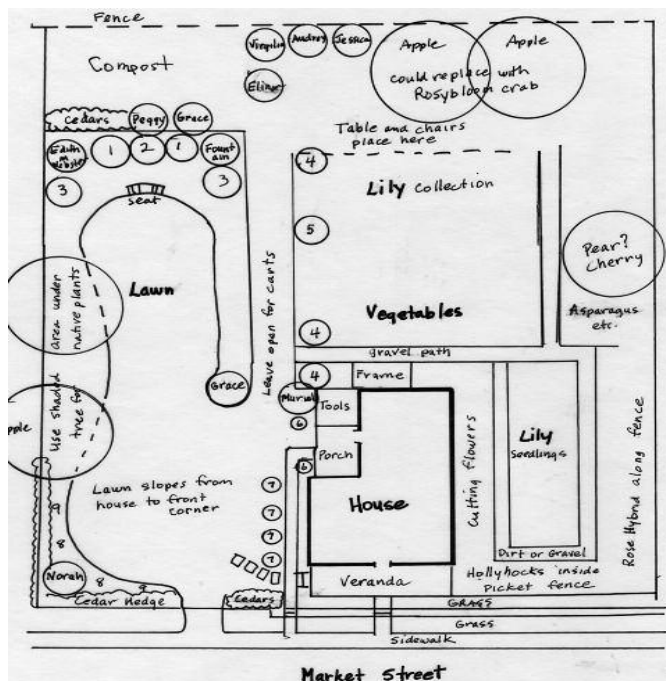
Among the pleasures of doing research are the small discoveries you make while looking for something else entirely. While going through the Isabella Preston Collection at the Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG), looking for an original plan for the Macoun Memorial Garden, I came across a photo of Isabella Preston in front of a small Victorian home. The label read “My house taken July 1951.” I asked myself if it was possible that this house and garden still existed along with long-planted specimens of her lilies, irises, or lilacs.

As early as 1922 Isabella dreamed of having her own garden, writing to a fellow hybridizer that she “had a great desire to have a garden of lilies of my own.” However, it was a dream that would wait until her retirement at age 65, when, after returning to her birth country of England, she discovered that the climate and slow post-war recovery were not to her liking. Isabella then returned to Canada, settling in the Guelph area where her Canadian adventures had started in 1912.

She purchased a cozy Victorian home on a large lot in nearby Georgetown, close to horticultural friends the Hutts and Sandy Best, another well-known lily breeder. Georgetown also was in a warmer climate zone than Ottawa, so she could grow more varieties.

A plan for her garden

Thanks to the thorough research done by Edwinna Von Bayer in preparation for writing her wonderful biography of Isabella, a photocopy of an un-dated and unattributed plan of Isabella’s garden titled, “Proposed Plan of Garden For Miss Isabella Preston, Georgetown Ont” was found in the Isabella Preston collection at the RBG. The quality of drawing in this plan indicates that it was likely done by a landscape architect. When I compared the drawing with that of the Maplelawn Garden created by landscape architect R. Warren Oliver, I found the printing style identical. Oliver was a co-worker of Isabella’s at the CEF, who had been hired to design the Macoun Garden. Having confirmed to my satisfaction that Oliver had done the plan,



Sketch of the proposed plan for the Preston garden in Georgetown.

Lynn Armstrong

I asked myself why, since Isabella was retired and no longer in Ottawa.

It turns out that Isabella was missed at the CEF after her retirement. She returned to visit and assist with the transition and completion of some of her projects into the 1950s. Mr. Oliver, who had taken over some of her duties, may have done the plan for her new property as a thank you for her help. Or perhaps Isabella had asked for help from Oliver because her new property had some slope issues similar to the Macoun garden.

What might have been planted

Warren Oliver’s drawing is an excellent resource, helping us to imagine what might have been planted in Isabella’s garden. It shows the following proposed plants:

- Lilacs** - ‘Norah’, ‘Grace’, ‘Ethel M. Webster’, ‘Peggy’, ‘Fountain’, ‘Virgilia’, ‘Audrey’, ‘Jessica’, ‘Elinor’ and ‘Muriel’;
- Roses** - ‘Orinda’ (a Preston white), ‘Harison’s Yellow’ or ‘Agnes’ (the latter bred by William Saunders at the CEF) (#9 on Plan), ‘Paul Crampel’ (#7 on Plan);
- Shrubs** - *Philadelphus* ‘Virginal’ or ‘Glacier’ (#1 on Plan), *Kolkwitzia amabilis* (#2 on Plan), *Hydrangea arborescens* or *Spirea x vanhouttei*



Isabella Preston’s house in Georgetown, Ontario.

Preston Papers, RBG Archives

Continued on Page 12

A Garden of Her Own Favourites ... *(continued from Page 11)*

(#3 on Plan), *Pinus mugo* (#4 on Plan), *Thuja occidentalis* 'Little Gem' (#5 on Plan), *Spirea callosa* 'Alba' or *Philadelphus* 'Dame Blanche' (#6 on Plan), *Forsythia* × *intermedia* (#8 on Plan).

The landscape drawing does not include a planting list for the perennials or annuals as Isabella was more than capable of choosing her own favourites. It appears that much of Warren Oliver's plan was implemented. He and Isabella were co-workers for over 10 years, he knew her tastes, and she most likely had input into the creation of the plan. In addition to discovering the plan, Edwinna von Baeyer's research included interviews with Isabella's family and horticultural friends which, when combined with her extensive research of Isabella's writings, enabled her to give us this description of Isabella's garden:

"Her house was sited on a large lot, offering scope for experimentation and gardening – all to herself, and not subject to bureaucratic restrictions ... She most likely included her favourite lilies mentioned in a 1959 article: 'Phyllis Cox' - her favorite Stenographer lily, also *L. martagon album* 'Hurricane', 'George C. Creelman', and *L. henryi* 'Citrinum'."

The garden layout

The garden layout is described as "almost a miniature Division of Horticulture grounds – she had her ornamental grounds and her experimental grounds. Miss Preston devoted a large space on the east side of her house to her lilies and iris, and the seedlings of crosses she continued to make."

Notable on the Oliver plan are lily seedlings in the middle of the east yard surrounded by rose hybrids along the property line fence, hollyhocks inside the front picket fence, and cutting flowers along the east side. Behind the house was a vegetable garden, and then her lily collection. We see a table and chairs placed under an apple tree, providing a viewing spot to admire the lilies.

In the side yard (on the west side of the house) a small curving lawn is somewhat enclosed by a cedar hedge. Within this area is a 'Norah' lilac flanked by the Forsythia and 'Orinda' rose. The west side of the house was lined with the 'Paul Crampel' rose. The undulating lawn stretched to the rear, and the end view of the lawn featured a row of lilacs with a cedar hedge to screen the compost area. The west side of the lawn was defined by two existing apple trees and the plan suggests that native plants be considered for this shady area.

A glimpse into her retirement paradise

Since my first sight of the picture of Miss Preston in front of her home, I daydreamed of visiting this garden and uncovering long-lost horticultural treasures, especially lilies or irises that Isabella had planted some 70 years ago. But a sketch from November 1981, which I found in Edwinna's research, shows a house built on what was Isabella's west lawn.

My hopes were further dashed when Google Street View revealed that the cosy Victorian home is no more, having been replaced by two houses. Other than mature trees, no plant materials appear to remain at the front of the houses. Sad to think that with a bit of foresight this home and garden could have become a lovely historic site to commemorate Isabella Preston and her amazing contribution to Canadian horticulture. Still, thanks to the donation of her papers to the RBG and the thoughtful research of Edwinna von Baeyer, we are able to have a glimpse into Miss Preston's retirement paradise.

Note: I would like to thank Edwinna von Baeyer for her thorough and entertaining biography of Isabella Preston, "The Horticultural Odyssey of Isabella Preston," which appeared in *Canadian Horticultural History*, vol 1, No 3, 1987, and for her generous donation of her research to the Friends of the Farm.



Isabella Preston in her Georgetown garden.

Lynn Armstrong recently retired from a career in Urban Design and Landscape Architecture and is now enjoying researching Ottawa's landscape history with a particular interest in early Ottawa driveways, parks and, of course, the jewel in the crown, the Central Experimental Farm.



Preston's 'Norah' lilac.