

Ralph Wright Curtis

December 8, 1878 — November 13, 1968

The death of Ralph W. Curtis in his ninetieth year brought to a close more than seventy years of devotion and dedication to Cornell University. For thirty-three of these years he was a professor at Cornell and devoted his energies to transmitting to two generations of students his enthusiasm and great understanding of the landscape merits of trees and shrubs. His kindliness and good humor endeared him to each of his students, and his teaching had effects far beyond the subject matter.

Ralph Curtis was born in Burlington, Wisconsin, son of Charles and Mira Vail Curtis and received his early education in Burlington. He first came to Cornell in 1897 and received his B.S. degree in agriculture in 1901 and the M.S. degree in 1905. He continued for a year as an assistant in nature study at Cornell and then left to work in the Boston Park Department under John A. Pettigrew. From this great park superintendent, Ralph Curtis gained his practical experience as well as his bride, Miss Allison Pettigrew, who survives him. In 1909 Professor Charles Sprague Sargent asked him to come to the Arnold Arboretum as assistant superintendent under Jackson Dawson. It was with this background of inspiration and practical experience that Ralph Curtis was called back to Cornell in 1913 by Liberty Hyde Bailey to become assistant professor of landscape art. He retired in 1945 with appointment as emeritus professor of ornamental horticulture.

During the years 1913 to 1945 Ralph Curtis was primarily a teacher and leader among his associates. He taught courses in lawnmaking, plant propagation, landscape design, and the production of trees and shrubs in nursery and park planting, as well as his outstanding courses in woody plants and their landscape value.

His writing included numerous bulletins and mimeographs as well as material for the public press. His voluminous classroom outlines and keys to woody plants were revised continuously; and, while he never published these extensive records, they have served many of his students in later years as the bases of numerous books and courses of study at other institutions. In his professional writing, as in the classroom, he was always concerned with his primary thesis of proper use of plants in creating simple, pleasing, and enduring landscapes. The standards thus set up are now accepted by all progressive plantmen.

Ralph W. Curtis joined Karl M. Wiegand (botany) Ralph Hosmer (forestry) and Eugene Montillon (landscape architecture) in 1928 on the first College of Agriculture study committee for setting up a Cornell Arboretum. This same group continued to serve as key leaders in the Arboretum development that was to become the Cornell

Plantations. Thus the Cornell Plantations stands as most tangible evidence of the interest, proficiency, and faith of Ralph Curtis and his associates.

As a citizen of the Ithaca community he frequently shared his knowledge by writing for the local press and by aiding garden clubs and other civic groups in improving the appearance of local roads, parks, and grounds.

It can most truly be said of Ralph Curtis that his contribution to horticulture lives on through his students, many of whom hold responsible positions in horticulture throughout the country. The significance of his thirty-three teaching years at Cornell lies as much in the regard by which he is held by his students as in his recognition as an authority on ornamental trees and shrubs. He was truly the beloved mentor in his chosen field. In his later years, the accomplishments of his students were the source of great pleasure to him. The strength of his teaching is shown in the number of sponsors of the Cornell Plantations who are former students of Ralph Curtis.

We concur with Albert Hazen Wright when he said that he knew of no finer human, in spirit and in practice, than Ralph Wright Curtis.

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