



Weesie Smith: *driving force for native plants*

A Chinese fringetree (*Chionanthus retusus*) is a majestic focal point in the spring garden of Weesie Smith (inset). The 88-year-old Smith is a lifelong advocate for plant conservation, an intrepid plantswoman, and a pillar of the Birmingham, Alabama, gardening community.

At 88, intrepid Alabama gardener and environmental activist Weesie Smith is still going strong.

BY ALLEN BUSH

I HAD JUST arrived at her Birmingham, Alabama, home last spring, and Louise Walker Goodall Smith was already downplaying the scope of her newest garden. As usual, the slender, agile 88-year-old, better known as “Weesie” to her friends, was being overly modest about her accomplishments, which run the gamut from identifying and introducing dozens of new plants to creative garden design, years of advocacy for conservation of native plants and natural areas, and a lifetime of volunteerism.

GARDEN ARTISTRY

Smith moved to her current home in Birmingham’s Forest Park neighborhood 15 years ago when she needed to downsize her garden from the five-acre gem on Pine Ridge Road she had tended for nearly 50 years—more on that later.

Her current garden may not be on the same scale as her earlier landscape, but it is colorful, creative, and fun. Walking around, she shows me the single bright yellow blooms on a kerria (*Kerria japonica*) which is underplanted with the evergreen Japanese holly fern (*Cyrtomium falcatum*). The white-flowered selection of Japanese roof iris (*Iris tectorum* ‘Alba’) and the durable spikemoss (*Selaginella braunii*) grow nearby.

Each turn of the pathway offers a reflection of Smith’s curiosity and her engaging personality; there is not a dull, unattended spot anywhere. In the back garden she points out two Southeast native trilliums—*Trillium lancifolium* and *T. pusillum*—I have never seen before and the mottled, heart-shaped leaves of native ginger (*Hexastylis shuttleworthii*).

PINE RIDGE ROAD GARDEN

The garden she repeatedly returns to in conversation, however, is her former garden on Pine Ridge Road. When she first moved to the five-acre property, set on a steep hillside in Birmingham’s Mountain Brook neighborhood, it was riddled with poison ivy and Japanese honeysuckle vines growing on hundreds of dying loblolly pine trees. Weesie laughs as she recalls dealing with the poison ivy. “For-

tunately I don’t get an allergic reaction, but my husband did, and it excused him from gardening,” she says.

After removing the vines and the dead trees, Smith planted thousands of native plants. Among them were trilliums, wild gingers (*Hexastylis* spp.), and lady slippers (*Cypripedium* spp.). The white-flowered fawn lily (*Erythronium albidum*) would be followed by yellow celandine poppies (*Stylophorum diphyllum*) and bright blue blooms of bluestar (*Amsonia tabernaemontana*). The garden included nearly a mile of winding paths, much of it lined with endless ribbons of blue-flowering woodland phlox and native azaleas. Over time, hickories, oaks, and beeches replaced the pines as the canopy

overhead. “The garden was an unbelievable masterpiece of native plants,” says D.D. Martin, a close friend and fellow Birmingham gardener.

There was a formal garden, too, where tulips, peonies, Iceland poppies (*Papaver nudicaule*), and white-flowering calla lilies prospered, and a winter garden, where the blooms of Christmas roses (*Helleborus niger*) heralded each new growing season. Her children played in an open area that became a moss garden when they grew up. And there was a terraced rock garden near the sun pit where she grew freesias that she donated for sale in the Birmingham Botanical Garden gift shop.

“Weesie is an intellectual gardener. She’d study what a plant needs. If it didn’t work in one spot, she’d try it in another spot,” says John Floyd, a long-time Birmingham resident who was formerly editor-in-chief at *Southern Living* and



Smith’s former five-acre garden on Pine Ridge Road, which she planted with thousands of shade-loving native bulbs, wildflowers, and shrubs, was a sought-after destination for garden tours.



Spring-blooming perennials such as woodland phlox (*Phlox divaricata*) and candytuft (*Iberis sempervirens*) welcome visitors to Smith's current garden.

currently writes about gardening for *Birmingham Gardening Today*, a website he co-founded.

Jan Midgley, owner of Wildflower nursery in Wilsonville, Alabama, visited Smith every Wednesday for seven years in the 1990s. On each visit, Smith would load her up with wildflowers that she dug with speed and efficiency from her garden. Midgley, who marveled at Smith's stamina, said it would take her all week back at her nursery to tuck in the plants.

JUST A DIRT GARDENER

I first encountered Smith in 1984 during the 50th anniversary celebration of the North American Rock Garden Society (NARGS), held in Asheville, North Carolina. She had driven to Asheville to mingle with other NARGS members and learn from many of the celebrity speakers, including trillium experts Roberta and Fred Case.

"It was an interesting meeting," she recalls, insisting her role there was merely as a gardener looking to expand her knowl-

edge. "I'm just a dirt gardener," she says. Once again, Smith is being modest. After meeting Smith, the Cases soon came to rely on her to take them to wild areas in Alabama where they could study the local trilliums under her guidance.

Smith, who wandered widely in the state's forests since she was a young girl and spends a lot of time driving up and down country roads, has a sharp eye for unusual native plants. Over the years, this has led her to make a number of notable discoveries. She recalls one trip she took with her late husband, Lindsay, to visit their son at college in Sewanee, Tennessee. "I saw something orange and I said to him, 'STOP!' When we got to Chattanooga, he said, 'Did you say something?' That was typical," she says with a laugh. Smith later drove back to find the plants, which turned out to be lilies. "I sent a sample to Joe Webb Thomas at the University of Alabama. He called up right away and was excited because it was a form of *Lilium canadense* that had never been reported in Alabama."

On another trip, driving in central Alabama near Haynesville, she spotted an intriguing-looking buckeye (*Aesculus* sp.) growing in a little depression along an embankment.

She was able to collect a specimen for identification. It turned out to be a low-growing form of the Ohio buckeye (*Aesculus glabra*), which typically grows into a tree. Noted woody plant expert Michael Dirr named it *A. glabra* var. *nana*. Others have speculated it could be from a disjunct population of Texas buckeye (*A. glabra* var. *arguta*), more commonly found west of Alabama.

Smith's buckeye didn't make much of a wave beyond a few avid plant collectors, but a native Alabama coral bell, *Heuchera macrorhiza*, has become a garden favorite across much of North America. Dick Lighty, founding director of the Mt. Cuba Center in Greenville, Delaware, saw the Alabama coral bell in Smith's garden for the first time more than 30 years ago.

Botanists and the gardening public have been confused *H. macrorhiza* with the better known hairy alumroot (*H. villosa*) for years—and in fact many references still regard them as synonymous—but the former has chartreuse leaves and white flowers that are larger than those of *H. villosa*. “Only a botanist who has never seen the plant in the garden would consider it conspecific with the widespread *Heuchera villosa*,” says Lighty, who started sharing seedlings with interested perennial growers.

Heuchera macrorhiza was not a name that easily rolled off tongues. It wasn’t until a plant labeled with a specious culti-

var name ‘Autumn Bride’ was introduced that the plant gained widespread commercial interest. The plants, easily grown from seed, are identical to the ones that grew in Smith’s Birmingham garden. As usual, Smith doesn’t care about the fuss and is not interested in taking any credit for the plant’s popularity.

“Weesie is truly a phenomenal plantswoman,” says Tony Avent, owner of Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, North Carolina. “We have an amazingly vigorous form of *Phlox stolonifera* from her that we named ‘Weesie Smith’.” Avent notes that a southern maidenhair fern (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*) cultivar called

ent styles,” she says. “My grandmother Goodall, who lived on Glen Iris Circle, was a collector type. She had three different types of figs and wanted iris that bloomed every month of the year.” Smith remembers the excitement that built up when Goodall’s night-blooming cereus was ready to flower. “She’d call us over and we’d get to stay out until 10 p.m.”

Her other grandparents were the Jemisons. Robert Jemison developed Birmingham’s Mount Brook and Forest Park neighborhoods. When the Great Depression hit, the Jemisons moved to a 300-acre dairy farm, nine miles outside of Birmingham.

The farm and garden were an inspiration. “Grandmother Jemison was a real gardener,” she remembers. “Every day after breakfast she would cut flowers from the garden and make a fresh arrangement for each of the seven rooms in the house. She had big rose beds, and then she had what she called her ‘pretty garden.’”

When Smith graduated from high school, the farthest north she had traveled was North Carolina. She decided to attend Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, recalling the choice as “a great move to get to a different part of the country.” She graduated in 1948 with degrees in mathematics and economics.

She married Lindsay C. Smith, a career accountant, the following year, and they had five children in quick succession. This didn’t slow down her gardening. “You spent half your life driving kids here and there, but you could certainly be at home between driving groups,” she recalls.

In the South at that time, “the flower garden,” says Smith, “was one of the outlets open to women. Flower arranging was important, too.”

Another important outlet for Smith was the driving itself, a practice she learned from her mother. “If I took the kids, I was free,” she says. She would load the kids, a few of their friends, and one or two of her own pals, and drive off in the brown Dodge station wagon toward the wilderness. In the 1960s, Bankhead, a rich mixed hardwood forest in north Alabama, was one of her favorite destinations. “I took the car where it wasn’t supposed to go,” says Smith. “I had 18 flat tires but never had to sit for more than two or three min-



A self-taught botanist, Smith has been involved with the introduction of a number of new plant selections. Above: ‘Autumn Bride’ is a selection of a coral bell (*Heuchera macrorhiza*) discovered growing in Smith’s garden. Left: This cultivar of creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*) with lilac flowers is named ‘Weesie Smith’ in her honor.

‘Alabama Lace’ was also a Smith discovery. “I’m sure many of the plants we got from others actually were Weesie’s discoveries,” says Avent.

GARDENING ROOTS

Smith’s genetic code played a big role in her gardening life. “Both of my grandmothers were gardeners but of differ-

utes before someone came by and fixed the flat for me. That's Alabama for you."

ADVOCACY EFFORTS

Smith's affection for Bankhead was a catalyst for her involvement in conservation advocacy. In the late 1960s, Bankhead was targeted for loblolly pine timber production by the U.S. Forest Service. Smith vowed she would do everything she could to prevent it. Thanks in part to her work, within a few years, the U.S. Forest Service backed off.

Several years later, Smith got involved with an effort to preserve Bankhead's Sipsey Wilderness Area. She went to Washington, D.C., to testify at Congressional hearings on the future of the Sipsey Wilderness. Impressed by her testimony, Alabama Senator Jim Allen called Smith personally to promise that nothing would happen to Sipsey without him talking to her first. "You didn't get handed something on a silver platter," says Smith, "not when it was against what the banking, commercial development, and coal mining interests might take away forever."

Smith continued her advocacy efforts on behalf of Sipsey, and helped draft the legislation that became the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act when it was signed into law in January 1975. Sipsey was preserved later that year, becoming the first designated wilderness area east of the Mississippi.

Smith was one of the early proponents of the "Dig and Save Movement," which inspired people to transplant native flora from areas destined for development. Over several decades, she rescued thousands of plants that might have been drowned, bulldozed, or paved over. Many of them were stockpiled in her garden or those of other rescue participants. She also shared plants with public gardens, including the Birmingham Botanical Gardens.

When Smith started downsizing her Pine Ridge Road garden, the Mt. Cuba Center in Delaware also became a beneficiary of her rare plants. Having originally saved these plants from development, Smith wanted them widely distributed and preserved for years to come.

Smith is now widely respected for her activism, but it wasn't always that way. "Weesie was an environmental advocate at a time when this was not fashionable, making her *persona non grata* in many so-



Smith, left, offers author Allen Bush and another visitor seedlings from her garden.

cial circles," says Fred Spicer, director of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens.

THINKING GLOBALLY, ACTING LOCALLY

The Birmingham Botanical Gardens is one of many local organizations that have benefited from Smith's activism and gen-



Taking a pause from a stint of volunteer gardening at the Kaul Wildflower Garden, Smith shares a light-hearted moment with the garden's curator, John Manion.

erosity. She has volunteered at the gardens every week for more than 40 years, planting, weeding, and maintaining the Kaul Wildflower Garden, and assisting with the annual plant sale. In addition to that hands-in-the-dirt involvement, she served on the garden's Board for four years.

To honor Smith, a plaque was unveiled at the Gardens during the 2013 Central South Native Plant Conference. In paying tribute to Smith during the unveiling ceremony, Spicer emphasized her ability to relate to people from a wide range of backgrounds. "She befriended everyone with common interests—and they befriended her—from amateur gardeners to wizened botanical sages, from members of the Red Mountain Garden Club to academic professionals, from hillbilly planthunters to nationally known nurserymen."

"I don't know anyone living or in the past, here in Birmingham, who will leave a bigger gardening legacy," says John Floyd. Thousands of others throughout Alabama and beyond have been touched in one way or another by Weesie Smith, but most of them are completely unaware of it. Smith would just as soon keep it that way.

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