

Columns

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Guest Column: 100 Years of Blues

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This year, 2016, marks an important date in the life of the cultivated blueberry—its 100-year anniversary! In the last century, blueberries have become a staple in the produce aisle and are a mainstay in the home garden. Consumption is skyrocketing. Millions of people around the globe benefit from the health benefits associated with eating blueberries, but what most people would be quite surprised to learn is that much credit for today's blueberry varieties is due to a very progressive woman at the turn of the 19th century. Without her determination and cutting-edge research, the blueberry world would likely be a

much different place.

Elizabeth White, the aptly titled “Blueberry Queen,” grew up in New Lisbon, New Jersey, and was highly educated, both through formal schooling and through self-teaching. Once she finished school, Elizabeth joined her father's farming business at their Whitesbog farm in the late 1800s and early 1900s. While their primary crop was cranberries, Elizabeth took a keen interest in blueberries—ultimately convincing her father to expand into blueberries. Until that time, blueberries were wild and not suited for commercial farming. Focused on trying to find plants with larger, better berries that would grow more uniformly, Elizabeth took the first steps towards developing new cultivars. In fact, Rubel, one of Elizabeth's first cultivars, is still sold in the nursery industry today.

Also pursuing the cultivation of blueberries during the same time period was Dr. Frederick Coville, a botanist who was doing his own scientific research on germination, soils, plant nutrition, propagation, pollination, winter chill requirements and breeding. It was Elizabeth who convinced Coville to bring his work to her family's farm, where she worked side-by-side with him to identify, propagate and hybridize the earliest varieties of commercial blueberries—varieties that would ultimately launch an industry.

As a woman in the nursery profession myself, I often wonder what it might have been like to be Elizabeth

White—young and female and intimately involved in her family farm. She was a woman, a full century ago, who was wholly devoted to farming and horticultural research and development; and who seemingly side-stepped the traditional and expected female roles of domesticity. She didn't shy away from hard, physical labor and her business acumen made her a trusted advisor to her father. She managed the family business with commitment and compassion towards the Whitesbog employees. She volunteered a great deal of time to her industry and to her community, including being a founding member of the Blueberry Growers Cooperative and the first woman to belong to the American Cranberry Growers Association. She was also a founder and long-term board member of the New Lisbon Developmental Center—a center for mentally-disabled men.

There's no question that Elizabeth White was a true visionary and pioneer, contributing immensely to her family business and beyond. She was instrumental in the success of the Whitesbog farm and had great influence on her father's business decisions, while living in an era when women's rights were still quite restricted. Elizabeth, by all accounts, was extremely intelligent with high business expertise, and yet, she was nearly 50 years old before she, along with all other women, even had the right to vote. It would be fascinating to talk to Elizabeth today to see how she reconciled her high authority and exceptional business success with her inability to simply cast a vote. She ultimately had to watch as her father bypassed her to name her brother-in-law president of the family business, simply because she was a woman.

Unquestionably, Elizabeth White was a woman ahead of her time. She rightly earned her unofficial title of "Blueberry Queen" by those who knew her. This year marks the 100th year anniversary of the cultivated blueberry and those of us who profit from blueberries—from plant nurseries, retail garden centers, fruit growers, grocers and all the allied industries that serve the blueberry industry—owe an immense debt of gratitude to Elizabeth White. More than anything else, Elizabeth White should serve as a reminder to us all about how powerful the contributions of one person can ultimately be.

So, thank you, Elizabeth White and happy 100 years to the cultivated blueberry! **GP**

Amy Daniel is the Marketing Manager for Fall Creek Farm & Nursery, Inc., a global blueberry breeding and plant company with nurseries in the U.S. (Oregon), Mexico, Peru and Spain. Fall Creek serves commercial fruit growers worldwide and also serves the nursery trade. BrazelBerries, Fall Creek's branded ornamental berry collection, was launched in 2013 and now includes seven berry varieties with more being introduced annually.