

# The Legacy of Luther Burbank

A florilegium honors an eccentric American botanist and horticulturist.

STORY BY *Nina Antze*

IN SEPTEMBER OF THIS YEAR the Sonoma County Colored Pencil Artists, of which a dozen are ASBA members, presented an exhibition at the Sebastopol Center for the Arts entitled *The Legacy of Luther Burbank*. Inspired by the Northern California Society of Botanical Artist's Alcatraz Project in 2013, we decided we wanted to do our own Florilegium focusing on the plants of Luther Burbank's Gold Ridge Farm, a short walk away from the art center where we meet each week. We see Burbank's name everywhere - on banks, concert halls and schools - and we realized that we had the work of a fellow naturalist, a scientist and plant lover right in our own backyard.

Luther Burbank was born on March 7th, 1849 on a farm near Lancaster, Massachusetts. He graduated from a private academy, but had no higher education and had difficulty finding something that he was good at and that could sustain him. Burbank's enthusiasm for nature was encouraged by his uncle's friend, Swiss-American naturalist Louis Agassiz. He was also inspired by reading Darwin's *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, and after Burbank's father died he purchased his first farm and began working on creating new and improved plants through cross-breeding and hybridization. His first real success was the Burbank potato, the ancestor of the Russet, also nicknamed Idaho. With the \$150 he made selling the rights to the potato, Burbank was able to move to Northern California and make his home in Santa Rosa. In 1885 he purchased 15 acres down the road in Sebastopol for what he called an Experiment Farm. The farm was named Gold Ridge when he bought it, and Burbank said of the area, "I firmly believe, from what I have seen, that this is the chosen spot of all this earth as far as Nature is concerned."



Luther Burbank in his Garden circa 1920, Library of Congress, LC-B2- 6512-13

Here he continued experimenting on creating new fruits and vegetables - varieties that would be better tasting, disease resistant and better producers. He worked with flowers too, creating more beautiful varieties that would be larger, smell better and last longer. By the 1900's Luther Burbank had become one of the most famous men in America and perhaps the world. He counted Henry Ford and Thomas Edison among his friends, and inspired both Frieda Kahlo (who painted a portrait of him) and Georgia O'Keefe.

More than anything Luther Burbank was an innovator and an inventor. He experimented with plants in the days when new and interesting plants were hard to come by. He was outspoken about his beliefs and obsessively secretive about his experiments. Burbank's methods were unusual and often unorthodox: he grafted multiple limbs onto fruit trees, cross-pollinated often by hand using a little brush, kept very few records of his experiments, and the records he did keep were in code and are undecipherable. He was always pushing the limits of what others thought was possible and was willing to wait years for results.

Some of his experiments failed or backfired. He is responsible for bringing parasitic European mistletoe to Sebastopol and for the endless miles of invasive Himalayan blackberry (which are actually very tasty but impossible to get rid of.) One of his more whimsical experiments was "clothing the



ABOVE, TOP. *Kniphofia uvaria* 'Tower of Gold', Tower of Gold Kniphofia, 14"x11", colored pencil on paper, ©Nina Antze BOTTOM. Luther Burbank cottage, Gold Ridge Farm ©Erin Sheffield, WSCHS

'Naked Lady"' (*Amaryllis belladonna* which grow in profusion in August every year) by crossing it with a wild *Crinum* from the swamps of Florida to create *hybrid x Amarcrinum memoriacorsii*, giving it tall slender leaves.

The list of his successes is too long to print here in its entirety. He "selected out" the Spineless Cactus to feed cattle and created a new species, the Shasta Daisy. He sent his potatoes to Ireland to help combat the blight. He was the first to successfully combine a plum and an apricot (he called it the plumcot). Along with the Santa Rosa plum, which he considered his greatest success, he created 112 other plums and prunes, 10 different apples, 16 blackberries, 13 raspberries, 10 strawberries, 35 fruiting cacti, 10 cherries, 2 figs, 4 grapes, 5 nectarines, 8 peaches, 4 pears, 11 plumcots, 11 quinces, 1 almond, 6 chestnuts, 3 walnuts, 9 different grains or grasses, 26 vegetables and 91 different ornamentals. He is considered to be the forerunner of contemporary plant breeding and hybridization.

Sadly, for many years after Burbank died in 1926 no one was willing or able to continue his



ABOVE, LEFT. *Malus sp.*, Winterstein Apples, 10"x8", ©Elizabeth Peyton, 2014 CENTER. *Leucanthemum x superbum*, Shasta Daisy, 13"x10", ©Nancy Wheeler Klippert, 2014 RIGHT. *Syringa vulgaris* hybrid, Hybrid French Lilac, 14"x11", ©Vi Strain, 2014. All three works colored pencil on film.

work and the farm fell into neglect. Fortunately in 1974 local historians worked with the city of Sebastopol to form the Western Sonoma County Historical Society, and acquired three acres of the original farm for restoration and preservation.

Many of the Burbank's original trees remain at the Gold Ridge Farm. His work cottage has been converted to a small museum and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978. The Burbank Rose grows outside it and a large Spineless Cactus greets visitors when they enter from the parking lot. There are paths through the multi-grafted fruit trees. Lilacs bloom in the spring and multiple varieties of Shasta Daisies grow in the Cottage Garden. Burbank's home in Santa Rosa is now a lovely museum and the gardens are full of many of his creations and other beautiful flowers as well as a multitude of roses.

The Gold Ridge site provides visitors with a map and informative brochures on many of the species still growing there. We arranged for tours and asked permission to get cuttings for our project, and then approached the Sebastopol Art Center and applied for a show in one of their smaller galleries. We worked out a time line with the hope that some of us could draw the same plant in different seasons, capturing both the flower and the fruit.

The farm was very generous in letting us take clippings as we needed them, something that we learned later probably would have horrified Luther Burbank. The Santa Rosa Home and Gardens where Burbank lived have a partnership with the Farm, and we were also able to acquire some plants and much inspiration from there. Thus began what would become quite an extensive project. By now we knew we wanted to learn even more about the man behind the plants.



*Nina Antze started out as a quilt maker but was "drawn" into botanical art while living in New York, where she earned a certificate in Botanical Illustration from The New York Botanical Garden in 2007. She teaches ongoing colored pencil classes in Sebastopol, CA where she lives with her husband on a 2 acre farm, and instructs at workshops around California including the certificate program at Filoli. She is active in NCalSBA, exhibits frequently and still makes the occasional quilt when a new grandchild arrives.*

The project has been a wonderful learning experience for all of us. Many of the trees at the farm are no longer marked and in a few cases we had to depend on the memory of volunteers or do internet research to determine what we were drawing. We have done copious reading of the books and articles written about Burbank. We have an "elusive" plumcot and a "mystery" plum that will not ripen and "makes terrible jam." We have braved the rains in the spring of 2013 when we were touring the farm and now our California drought is stressing many of the plants. The more research we did the more we realize we were not just documenting a garden but also the man responsible for it.

In September we hung 31 paintings along with a wall of historical information, quotes from Luther Burbank and commentaries on the plants. We had a lovely reception on September 11th featuring many of the fruits of Burbank's labors (to eat) along with the fruits of our labor (to view). We invited local schools to visit and inspired by Margaret Pope's Sonoran Desert project (*TBA, June 2014*) we created small cards showing two inch sections of our paintings to encourage the students and viewers to look more closely at the botanical art, and coordinated with the Historical Society to show our cards at the farm and hope to encourage more interest in both the Gold Ridge Farm and in botanical art.

Luther Burbank's work reflects so many of the same values of botanical artists - a love of the beauty and science of plants and a desire to make them even more beautiful and present them to the world. As Burbank said, "Flowers always make people better, happier, and more helpful; they are sunshine, food and medicine for the soul." ☼ The artists represented in the show are ASBA and NCalSBA members Nina Antze, Adrienne Bowes, Margie Goff, Nancy Wheeler Klippert, Victoria A. Kochergin, Jackie Lueder, Joanne Page, Elizabeth Peyton, Linda Rouse, Ginny Ritama Spencer, Vi Strain and Chris Woodward along with Rebecca Lichau and Suzanne Cogen.



Sixth graders from Brook Haven School in Sebastopol finding the details in the paintings.