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Book Review - The Little Bulbs: A Tale of Two Gardens

Karin J. Bennedsen
Georgia Highlands College, kbenneds@highlands.edu

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Off the SHELF

The Little Bulbs: A Tale of Two Gardens by Elizabeth Lawrence. Duke University Press Books, 1986. ISBN 978-0-8223-0739-6 Price: \$23.95

Garden books usually consist of lists of plants with descriptions and how-to's for planting and maintenance. Descriptions are rather stiff and to the point. Even when history and lore is included, the writing reads rather like an encyclopedia entry.

Not so with Elizabeth Lawrence's *The Little Bulbs: A Tale of Two Gardens*. Her writing is more conversational and congenial. Best known for her book, *A Southern Garden*, this subsequent book is a comparison of her small city garden in South Carolina to an enormous forest garden in Ohio. The focus is on "little bulbs," apparently meaning bulbs that produce miniature or dwarf plants, though there are mentions of plants getting as tall as three feet. Her ambition was to have one of every kind of these bulbs in her garden, which doubled as her laboratory, since she kept detailed records of her plantings and observations.

The book conveys the beauty and hardness of bulb plants whether in a South Carolina, Ohio, New England, or California garden. She obtained information pertaining to gardens in other regions through her correspondence with gardeners all over the United States, as well as some in other countries.

In *The Little Bulbs: A Tale of Two Gardens*, her principal correspondent is Mr. Krippendorf, the owner of the second garden. Through her thoughts and quotes from his letters, she expresses their shared passion for bulbs with appreciation, amazement, and excitement. "It is not enough to grow plants; really to know them one must get to know how they grow

elsewhere," she states in the preface. As a columnist for the *Charlotte Observer*, she often mentioned the people she corresponded with, including Mr. Krippendorf, who became "as familiar to her readers as characters in a novel" (Miller).

She held a degree from North Carolina State College in landscape architecture, was erudite, and a people person. In a 1998 article in *Horticulture*, Carol Miller wrote, "I would never write a line about any plant without first checking to see what Miss Lawrence had to say about it..." Through her attentiveness and curiosity she became a botanist, providing scientific information in her writing, albeit with personalization exuding inspiration in gardening.

The Little Bulbs: A Tale of Two Gardens is chock full of scientific names, which can be overwhelming. However, the descriptions of plants and flowers are poetic prose. On the one hand, the science, as in plant and flower part names, can be incomprehensible, while on the other the descriptions are evocative, such as the colors aureolin yellow, Tyrian pink, and rhodamine purple. Reading her narrative one can envision the gardens and even a time-lapse of the buds opening. Included is history on ancestry (from origin through introduction), local names, and availability of plants, which she meticulously researched.

Little Bulbs: A Tale of Two Gardens is a wonderful reference for the dedicated, enthusiastic gardener. For others, the anecdotes are a good enough reason to read the book while gathering ideas for their own gardens. It may be worthwhile to just focus on a particular chapter when looking for varieties of daffodils, crocuses, or lilies to introduce into one's garden. At any rate, to Elizabeth Lawrence

gardening was an adventure she fervently believed was to be shared. She ends the preface of the book with the phrase, "no one can garden alone," which ultimately became the title of a biography about her.

References

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Karin Bennedsen is Reference & Instruction Librarian at Georgia Highlands College, Cartersville Campus