

Introduction to the Workshop

Luther Burbank: Plant Breeder, Horticulturist, American Hero

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The workshop was held on Monday, 22 July 2013 in Desert Springs, CA, at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Society for Horticultural Science to celebrate the extraordinary career of the most famous American Horticulturist. Its purpose was to honor Luther Burbank, legendary plant breeder and horticulturist; to examine his contributions and present the fate and impact of his creations; and to emphasize the role of artistry and horticulture in plant breeding. Burbank was an outstanding horticulturist, an innovative, truly amazing plant breeder, and a self-promoter who established the concept that plant breeding could be a business. He was a controversial figure and although he cannot be considered a scientist or geneticist in the academic sense, he made outstanding contributions to plant breeding, where he was truly an artist. In his lifetime he was considered in the panoply of great American inventors who include Samuel Morse,

Thomas Alva Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Henry Ford, and Cyrus McCormick. He was known as the plant wizard and he still remains the best known American horticulturist.

There were a total of seven speakers in the workshop. Jules Janick gave the opening presentation entitled “Luther Burbank: Plant Breeding Artist, Horticulturist, and Legend,” which presented a biographical overview and career overview from his birth in Lancaster MA, in 1849, his glory days in Santa Rosa, CA, where he established his famous nursery, through his death in 1926. As a very young man he created his most famous plant discovery—the famous potato that bears his name, which incredibly was derived from 23 seeds and 15 seedlings of open-pollination of an introduction known as ‘Early Rose’. This discovery and impact were treated in a presentation by Charles Brown entitled “Russet Burbank: ‘No Ordinary Potato.’” The contribution of

Burbank to ornamentals was presented by Neil O. Anderson entitled “A Vast Array of Beauty: The Accomplishments of Luther Burbank, Father of American Ornamental Breeding,” which includes the development of the ‘Shasta’ daisy, one of his most creative contributions. Two papers on plums followed: the first presented by David A. Karp entitled “Luther Burbank’s Plums,” which highlights the development of Japanese plums, and the second presented by Ann Callahan entitled “21st Century Approach to Improving Burbank’s Stoneless Plum.” This was followed by a presentation of John Preece entitled “Luther Burbank’s Contribution to Walnuts.” Finally Kim E. Hummer concluded with a presentation entitled “Luther Burbank’s Berries.” The workshop was well attended with vigorous discussion. The entire workshop has been videotaped and is available from the American Society for Horticultural Science.

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