George H. Pring, “FATHER OF TROPICAL WATER LILIES”

by Joe Summers, Missouri Botanical Garden with photos from MBG archives, Perry D. Slocum, Joe Summers & Helen Nash

In 1906, George Pring needed to decide where he would work. His choice would both change and enrich many lives, offering our gardens beauty unmatched before.

George Harry Ethelbert Pring was born December 2, 1885, in Devonshire, England, the youngest of four children of Charles and Mahalla Pring. Charles was a successful builder in Exmouth until ‘Depression’ hit and the family moved to the London area. Young George grew up about two blocks from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Upon reaching the highest level of school at the time, about the seventh grade, George took on an apprenticeship at Kew. Both father and son figured that George would follow in his father’s business and someday end up in the building profession. Charles Pring told his son, “We can always make an architect out of you later on,” when he learned of the Kew apprenticeship.

Just shy of his 14th birthday, Pring began work at Kew each morning at 6:00. Breakfast and a lunch hour were at eight and twelve respectively. The day ended at 6:00 p.m. Cleaning pots, feeding the chickens, and packing plants for shipment were part of Pring’s early duties. As time went on, he took charge of the carnivorous plants and eventually was, also, put in charge of two of the orchid houses. Finally, some training on the actual grounds gave Pring a well-rounded, horticultural experience.

The best possible education in horticulture in the early 1900’s was a two-year training program at the Queen’s School of the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew. During the evening classes, Pring began to sit in on the lectures, since he was not yet the mandatory 21-years-of-age necessary to enter the program. Pring took notes and attended the lectures for practice, hoping one day to enter the program. At one point, he turned in his lecture book, along with all the regular students, to be graded. Receiving good marks, the lecture book captured the eye of the Director. Barely 19, young George was inducted into the Kew program as the youngest student ever.

With the end of his second year, anticipating employment, Pring learned of positions at other botanical gardens. The first position was at the Botanical Gardens of Calcutta, India, and the second was at Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis. Missouri Botanical Garden (MBG) was looking for someone to take charge of the orchids. Pring was told that he would make a better American than an Indian. Being just 20, Pring needed his parents’ permission to go to America. “You’re far too young,” his parents told him. Finally, George’s father stated, “I’m going to say to you that you decide for yourself. It’s your career. It’ll be your future.” Ten days after George H. Pring said yes, he began to work at Missouri Botanical Garden.

In March of 1906, George H. Pring (sitting) arrived at MBG. Pictured with him is George Edward McClure, the man who held Pring’s new job. McClure remained at MBG to help Pring settle into his new role. Photo courtesy of MBG archives.

In 1950 Pring registered this Laelia cattleya orchid that he named ‘St. Louis.’ This plant is still in the MBG collection. Photo by Joe Summers.

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When Pring was shown the orchids at MBG, he challenged himself to work toward a Kew-style collection. A though orchids were just one of the many horticulture fields in which Pring worked at MBG, he was an orchid expert for more than 60 years and developed numerous outstanding hybrid orchids that are registered with the American Orchid Society.

Mr. Pring was the driving force in making the annual Orchid Show a success. He staged shows in New York City, Boston, and Washington, D.C., along with a number of other cities. These exhibits were both educational and outright beautiful. In 1954 the First World Orchid Congress was held in St. Louis with Pring as Chairman of the event. Over the years, Pring accumulated many awards and compliments as Chairman of Installation.

Pring’s plant-collecting trips to Central and South America began in 1923. While on his first trip to Colombia, Pring established a tropical station on behalf of MBG in the Canal Zone. The station was used for research in orchids and tropical plants. When Pring returned from one trip that lasted six months, he arrived home with more than 5,000 plants. Over the course of his career, the MBG’s orchid collection grew from the 300 plants when Pring arrived to over 50,000 plants with about 1200 varieties. The MBG orchid collection was second to none, including Kew Gardens.

In 1907, keeping a promise made to his parents, George Pring returned home for a visit 18 months after his arrival to St. Louis. On the boat trip to England, he met a young lady, Isabelle McAdie, who was traveling with her grandmother to visit an uncle. Over the next three years, the friendship turned to romance. The couple wed in New York and returned to St. Louis to raise four children. With influences of the family home on MBG property and their father’s passionate occupation, the three Pring boys became horticulturists and the Prings’ daughter married a botanist.

George Pring was not alone in his dedication to Missouri Botanical Garden. His wife, Belle, as she was most commonly known, helped establish the Garden’s auxiliary, which operated Tower Grove House, the home of MBG founder Henry Shaw. It was the Prings’ friendships, in fact, that led to the restoration of the building. Belle initiated the first volunteer program to staff the home for public tours, and she herself filled in many roles.


Creating backyard havens.

times for no-shows over the years to keep the project alive. Belle also served many garden clubs of the area in various posts, including President of the Better Gardens Club and the Margaret Krueger Conservation Club.

Although George Pring’s work with orchids and tropical plant collection alone would immortalize him in MBG history, he is perhaps most recognized for his accomplishments with the tropical water lilies. If you visit a public display of water lilies or open an aquatic plant catalog, you view his work. Pring introduced improved quality, improved forms, and even new colors of tropical water lilies. For such a significant body of work, Pring is undisputed as “the father of tropical water lilies.”

Pring’s legacy began in 1912 when he decided to cross-pollinate some water lilies. Pring later explained two reasons for his changing field of interest from orchids to water lilies: “First, to grow lilies from seed to bloom takes only one year, but an orchid can take seven years. Hybrid lilies can thus be produced sooner. Second, there were few if any, horticulturists working with tropical lilies, providing a challenging field for experimentation.”

Pring was most intrigued with day-blooming tropical lilies. Blooming high above the water’s surface and their floating leaves for 4-6 successive days during the long summer hours, many of them bear a wonderful fragrance well worth an indulgent trip into the pond. Pring set very high standards when introducing a...
was awarded a Silver Medal from the Society of American Florists. It is often speculated that this lily was one of Pring’s all-time favorites. He named it ‘Mrs. George H. Pring’ to honor his wife.

Another Silver Medal was awarded to Pring the next year by the Society for ‘General Pershing,’ which is a large pink lily.

Pring’s accomplishments have assumed legendary proportion. One true tale begins with the St. Louis newspapers being called to announce that a twelve-year project to find the “lost yellow lily” of Africa was completed. The fabled yellow lily had been described but had not been seen for many years, rumored to be ‘lost’ to cultivation. Finally, a seed pod arrived in St. Louis via Pring’s research contacts in Africa. Pring examined the pod and its contents, only to be disappointed. “The seed pod was collected too early. These seeds are immature.” Stubbornly, Pring made an important decision. “We’re gonna take every one of these seeds out and soak them.

The first Gold Medal ever awarded by the National Association of Gardeners was given to Pring’s introduction of the Whitaker Strain of lilies in 1920. It was stated at the time of the award, “This has opened up a new era in water lily fame.” Pring’s continued work with water lilies forced MBG to build bigger display pools to better showcase his creations.

Pring’s next breakthrough came, after careful breeding, with the introduction of the first white hybrid tropical water lily. Exhibited for the first time at the National Flower Show in 1922, this lily was awarded a Silver Medal from the Society of American Florists. It is often speculated that this lily was one of Pring’s all-time favorites. He named it ‘Mrs. George H. Pring’ to honor his wife.

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There's always a possibility that one might be fertile.

Pring took the pod to Joe Cutak, his assistant, and the two men soaked every seed, totaling about 3,000. Within three weeks, Cutak reported, "I think there's a little seedling coming through - the yellow water lily." Pring later reported, "When the first (flower) bud appeared, he (Joe Cutak) and I couldn't wait." They opened the flower bud and were "highly delighted." It was indeed "the lost yellow lily." An unbelievable story, one seed out of about three thousand germinated... just one seed germinated.

Pring not only proved its existence, but he would later produce some of his best lilies using "the lost yellow lily" as a parent. The color yellow had not previously been seen in tropical lilies, making this a most notable discovery. Pring would go on to introduce several new hybrids in the yellow color range, the first being 'St. Louis,' which was the only Pring lily ever granted a U.S. patent. The 'St. Louis' lily was also awarded the National Flower Show's Medal in 1933. 'Aviator Pring' is a dark yellow lily named to honor Pring's youngest son who was killed during a flight while he served in the military.

Besides his son and his wife, Pring also named a lily for his daughter. 'Isabelle Pring' is a wonderful white lily. 'Joanne Pring', a dark pink flower, is named for his first granddaughter. As you visit displays of tropical lilies in the future, you will spot these names and many more. Pring often would name a lily after a family member or a person significant to his work. There are also lilies named for staff of Missouri Botanical Garden such as 'Joe Cutak' and 'Director George T. Moore.'

In total, George Pring created or introduced about 40 tropical water lilies over the course of 45 years. His work has left a lasting legacy in the world of lilies.
Pring's breeding efforts are still studied by current hybridizers. To his credit, Pring kept detailed records and made his breeding public. When he introduced a new plant, he published the work in great detail in Missouri Botanical Gardens' Bulletin. A large portion of these forty lilies have stood the test of time and are still considered the best.

Besides introducing the first white tropical hybrid, ‘Mrs. George H. Pring’ and the first yellow tropical hybrid, ‘St. Louis,’ Pring also introduced the first hybrids of pygmy forms for the home gardeners. And last, but not least, he introduced the first white form of the gigantean species from Australia calling it ‘Aibert De Lestang.’ In referring to the Australian species lily, Pring once stated, “Nymphaea gigantea blue is the finest tropical water lily of any in cultivation, including my own hybrids.”

Toward the end of George Pring’s career, a newspaper article shared his “three loves.” The article told of Pring’s work with orchids, water lilies, and his lovely wife. It went on to say that these were the “three loves of George Pring.” Well, Mrs. Pring “did not like that very well” as she was listed third after the orchids and lilies. This remained quite the joke for years to come. Although these may have been Pring’s loves, it is not the complete picture.


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Mrs. George H. Pring. Photo by Perry D. Slocum.


Pond & Garden

accomplished in Calcutta.” Missouri Botanical Garden and the world now benefit from what Pring accomplished in St. Louis. After their deaths, Missouri Botanical Garden established the “Pring Memorial Garden” to honor Mr. And Mrs. George H. Pring. Located in the Japanese Garden, this special Memorial Garden is near where the couple lived. Also, “The Pring Water Lily Pool” is dedicated to forever honor the man and his work, showcasing the beauty of only Pring’s tropical water lilies therein. Two plaques near the memorial pool share his history with visitors.

George Pring made many decisions in his life that benefited many of us. He himself said, “If I had my life to do over again, I wouldn’t change a thing. I’d marry the same girl, no regrets at all.” We can only hope that we each can say the same of our life decisions.

Joe Summers is a Production Greenhouse Horticulturist with Missouri Botanical Garden. Aquatic plant production is one of his duties. Joe is also the president of the St. Louis Water Gardening Society. Much thanks to Jon Sweeney, the MBG archives, and Perry D. Slocum for their help in bringing this feature to you!
Water Gardens ARE FOR Everyone!

by Josh Spece

Creativity is the key to water features for the physically challenged.

As any water gardener what the best part of having a back yard pond is, and I bet most will say the peaceful, relaxing atmosphere it creates. The soothing music of running water, the lusciousness of floating lily pads with their rainbow-like flowers, and the playful movement of the fish are just what the doctor ordered after a long day at work. Not only is it beautiful to look at, but being able to get down close to the water to feel the different textures of the plants “play” with the fish while you feed them is also a very rewarding part of water gardening.

For most people, getting close to the water is no problem, but for many it’s just not that easy. Millions of people, both young and old, have physical limitations due to aging, injuries, or as in my case, diseases. Are we just not supposed to feel the softness of parrot’s feather or let a friendly Koi nibble our fingers? NO!

I have used a wheelchair my entire life (all 20 years of it!) because I was born with a form of Muscular Dystrophy. My interest in plants goes back as far as I can remember, and I have been fascinated by water gardens almost as long. The fascination was so strong that my mother and I opened a small nursery specializing in water gardens and hostas in 1998, and I graduated in 2000 with an A.A.S in Horticulture.

My family’s first water garden was a traditional in-ground pond. Like so many first-time water gardeners, we made the mistake of making it too small. The next spring, out it came, and in went a larger pond, but this one was unique.

With a little creativity, my parents, grandparents, and I came up with a plan to make the new pond handicap-accessible. The site where we put the pond had a slight slope to it. We started at the lowest point and dug back into the hill. This gave us a three-sided hole about twelve feet by sixteen feet by about two feet deep. We wanted the pond to be three feet deep, so we took out another foot in the center.

The next step was to build a retaining wall on the open side of the hole. We used pressure-treated, tongue and groove 1 x 6’s with 4 x 4 posts set in the ground at each side with a 6 x 6 post in their center. These 6 x 6 post and the 4 x 4 posts on the west side of the wall were used to construct an arbor. The final step was to finish digging the plant shelves and install the liner.

I am able to pull right up to the retaining wall with my wheelchair and spend time hand feeding the fish or work with any plants that are within reach. Because the pond is built into a small hill, the wall isn’t visible unless you are at that end, and the rest of the pond looks very natural, like any other in-ground pond.

If you don’t have a hill on your property to build a partially raised water garden, you can build a completely raised water garden on any flat area. Instead of just one retaining wall, you will have four. Depending on how large you want the pond, you should have a 4 x 4 or 6 x 6 post in each corner and possibly one in the center of each wall for extra support. Water is very heavy and exerts a lot of force! Landscaping timbers and railroad ties are two more wood options.

If wood doesn’t fit with the rest of your landscaping, other alternatives for constructing the retaining wall exist. Though more costly, brick and retaining wall blocks also make nice, sturdy walls and have the added bonus of coming in a variety of colors.

So far, the accessible water gardens are for everyone!
Containers allow you to add a little bit of paradise to any corner of your yard or patio. A ny container will work as long as it will hold water. Some that I have used include differently sized plastic flowerpots, granite bowls and pans. Rubber Maid storage containers, and, of course, lined whiskey barrels.

The plantings are just as diverse as the containers themselves. Upright plants that I like to use in my containers include dwarf umbrella palm, dwarf cattails, water iris, corkscrew rush, and, for larger containers, taro. For variety, I also like to use a lower, spreading plant. Parrot’s feather (both the common and miniature forms), water snowflake, floating heart, pennywort, and variegated water celery are great choices.

The stars of most traditional water gardens, lilies and lotus-es, are certainly not out of the question when it comes to container ponds. There are many small to dwarf growing water lilies that will work just fine. Two of my favorites are ‘Little Sue’ with 2-3” rose-apricot flowers, and the tiny ‘Helvola.’ This cheery little lily with its purple-splotched leaves and quarter-sized yellow flowers is small enough for all but the tiniest container ponds!

The small lotus ‘Momo Botan’ will also live in a patio pond quite happily and the new bowl varieties should work well, too, but they are a little harder to come by. U nless your container is large, the lotus will probably be about all that it will hold. A nice combination that I discovered by accident is under-planting a lotus with parrot’s feather. They grow together peacefully and the parrot’s feather eventually drapes over the edge of the container. An impressive display for a patio or deck!

In all but the smallest container ponds, a fish or two will add a little movement. U se common sense when stocking a container pond – nothing very large and no more than one or two.

Water gardens are more than just beautiful to look at. They are a retreat from every day life that no one should be without. Water gardening can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of physical ability. The possibilities are endless with a little imagination and creativity.

Josh Spece lives with his family on a dairy farm near Independence, Iowa. He has three ponds and has been water gardening for about ten years. He and his mother, Sue, operate a garden and gift shop, specializing in water gardens, hostas, garden art, and home-spun crafts. Josh can be reached by e-mail at jspece@bobek.net. His web address is http://www.palmetto.com/jspece. Watch for Josh’s new column in future issues of P&G!
Tiki Tour
by Linda Siler, Springfield Watergarden Society
Photos by Jim Lersch

The Springfield Watergarden Society has established an annual tradition – a nighttime pond tour!

The Springfield Watergarden Society has created an annual tradition. This past September 23rd, we had our 2nd annual Tiki Tour. You might ask, what is a Tiki Tour? Well, my pond-loving friends, it's an after-dark pond tour!

All ponds are quite wonderful during the day, but imagine those same ponds after dark - with tiki torches, illuminating candles, fire burning chimineas, landscaping lights — all surrounding the ponds, lighting up waterfalls, highlighting the plants and fish… with subtle shadows and reflections cast upon the water’s surface. Sound great? Well, it is!

We had been planning this event for an entire year as one of our two members-only tours. Four members volunteered to host us this year, Jim and Lyle owned the last pond on the tour, deserts and drinks to be served at their home. Think about it: trekking together with friends to see wonderful ponds and gardens, and then being rewarded with food!

Since it had been dry all summer, kind of a mini-drought, no problem with the date, or so we thought. Our chosen date arrived with ominous gray clouds layered across the rising sun. Turning on the television, I heard the weather man say, “A 70% chance of rain today.” I grimaced at the thought of 175 club members running between raindrops…but, neither rain, nor thunder, nor lightning would postpone this event.

The members’ convoy started at 7:00 p.m., with scheduled arrival at the first pond at 7:30 p.m. A t 7:15 we heard the first rumble of thunder in the distance, and, of course, lightning tore through the heavy clouds. Slowly, very slowly, drop by drop, the rain began. Splat…splat…splat

We arrived promptly at the first pond – Bill and Jackie Reynolds. One by one we huddled under umbrellas. Then, by some stroke of luck, it stopped raining. Bill and Jackie's pond is gorgeous with lush landscaping everywhere — annuals prevail, along with the most wonderful sumac tree you have ever seen. Don’t know what to do with an old bicycle? Do what Bill and Jackie did - lean it up against the house and let flowers grow through it. Bill and Jackie's pond is only one year old, but it seems to have been there forever.

The rains held off as we loaded back into the cars to head to Pond Number Two. But…splat…splat…splat…splat. Frantically, my windshield wipers swatted at the deluging raindrops. Undaunted, we converged on Katie, Jennie, and Sam. Some sissy members sat in their cars, while the brave ones waded through the water. A nd then… it stopped raining. A long came the sissies.

Kate and Jennie have a 3,000-gallon pond

The Reynolds' pond and garden were featured in P & G's November/December 2000 issue!

Bill and Jackie Reynolds have decorated their garden as much for their grandchildren's enjoyment as their own.

“Creating backyard havens”
green topiaries, banana trees, cannas, ornamental grasses, taro, yucca, and the most spectacular Cedrus atlanticus tree you have ever seen. It must be 25 feet tall. Decorative garden art takes the form of a Grecian-style bench and concrete angels watching over the flower beds.

Then there is the pond. Surrounded by banana trees, cannas, butterfly bushes, and assorted annuals, along with a huge container of green sweet potato vine at one end, the pond holds 2500 gallons with a 150-gallon bio-filter. The plants inside the pond are botanical treats, as well – both hardy and tropical lilies and large clumps of mature marginals, all nuzzled by colorful Koi and goldfish.

there is the roofed arbor. It's an old satellite dish. Dr. Dave turned the old dish into a star-bright arbor draped with small, white, twinkling lights. Nothing short of magic.

With only a sweet-smelling breeze to remind us of rain, we were off to see Pond Number Four at Jim and Lyle's home. There are no words to describe it. Walking into the back yard, a kaleidoscope of flowers surrounds you. A nuals line brick pathways that converge around the pond, the paths taking you to different areas in the garden. Fountains and flowing water abound. A huge, overflowing jar sits in the middle of a six-foot-wide concrete basin centered on an elevated, brick, open courtyard, amid evergreen topiaries, banana trees, cannas, ornamental grasses, taro, yucca, and the most spectacular Cedrus atlanticus tree you have ever seen. It must be 25 feet tall. Decorative garden art takes the form of a Grecian-style bench and concrete angels watching over the flower beds.

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awesome gardens, and our #1 passion, ponds. In future years, come rain or starry skies, the Springfield Watergarden’s Tiki Tour will continue.

Linda Siler is the president of the Springfield Watergarden Society in Springfield, Missouri. She also manages O’Quinn’s Orchids and Water Gardens in Springfield. She can be reached at 417-883-2399. Jim Lersch, a fellow club member, is a professional photographer. He can be reached at 417-724-8637.

With the food for our eyes satiating our souls, it was tummy time. Dozens of different deserts awaited. Imagine, warm hearts with friends, a soft breeze whispering through an incredible garden, and chocolate!

Splat. Oh, no, no, no! I saw lightning; I heard thunder; and I (splat) felt rain. 175 people ran under the porch and into the house. One intelligent person suddenly yelled, “Hey! We’re ponders. We love the water. What’s the big deal?” You know, he was right. When you think about it, we had Mother Nature’s lights, and the rain on the plants made them shine like diamonds. The whole garden shimmered and glowed. So as we sat, eating our deserts and drinking hot coffee, we all agreed this was a perfect evening: fine conversations, great friends,