

Cynthia Westcott, 1898-1983

R. K. Horst



Cynthia Westcott, the Plant Doctor, died of a heart ailment at Phelps Memorial Hospital in North Tarrytown, New York, on March 22, 1983. She had lived in Croton-on-Hudson since retiring in 1962.

Cynthia was born in North Attleboro, Massachusetts, June 29, 1898. She received the B.Sc. degree from Wellesley College in 1920 and was awarded the Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1932. Her doctoral dissertation was on brand canker of roses caused by *Coniothyrium wernsdorffiae*.

After receiving the doctorate, she learned that there were few, if any, jobs available for women plant pathologists. She was a research assistant on Cornell University's Plant Pathology staff for 10 years and then took a part-time assistantship as a bacteriologist with the New Jersey Experiment Station at Rutgers University.

She took additional courses at Rutgers, one of these was microbiology, taught by Dr. Selman Waksman. However, she was influenced most by H. H. Whetzel of Cornell University, her former professor whom she highly respected, to go into practical plant doctoring. The Plant Doctor's first client was Dr. Waksman, the discoverer of streptomycin. She practiced her profession very much as an M.D. did in those days. She made housecalls to diagnose problems and treated roses and other ornamentals in her clients' gardens. It is probable that she was the first consulting plant pathologist. During the winter months, she wrote, lectured, and traveled.

Dr. Westcott's famous clients also included Helen Hayes, the Maxwell Andersons, and the Milton Caniffs. She conducted garden courses for Macy's department store and special clinics for Bambergers department store, and taught special courses at the New York Botanical Garden and the Brooklyn Botanical Garden. Dr. Westcott's articles have appeared in numerous garden magazines. She wrote regular columns on gardening for the *New York Times* and *Home Garden* magazine and contributed to the book *Ten Thousand Garden Questions Answered*, which was published by *Home Garden*. Clients were often referred to Cynthia by her many friends and colleagues associated with experiment stations and universities.

In 1943, Dr. Westcott was called upon by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to work temporarily in Mobile, Alabama, on azalea flower spot, a devastating disease caused by *Ovulinia azalea*. The disease had become economically important throughout the South; both nurserymen and merchants experienced severe financial losses due to the adverse effects of the disease on tourism. A special appropriation was allocated by Congress for this work. Because Dr. D. L. Gill was serving in the army and Dr. J. F. L. Childs had been transferred to work on citrus in Florida, someone was needed to carry on work on this disease and Dr. Westcott was highly

recommended by her professional colleagues. She accepted the challenge. She cultured and identified the fungal pathogen and developed a chemical spray treatment that saved the blooms. She was among the first plant pathologists to control a disease with the new class of fungicides, the disodium ethylene bisdithiocarbamates, now known worldwide as zineb and maneb.

The Plant Doctor has been featured in articles in *Mademoiselle* and *The Reader's Digest*, and in *This Week* magazine which is distributed nationwide in Sunday newspapers. *New Yorker* magazine honored her with one of their famous profiles in 1952. J. G. Horsfall and E. B. Cowling dedicated Volume IV of their book, *Plant Pathology, An Advanced Treatise*, "To Cynthia Westcott, the prototype practitioner of plant pathology, and all others who have made plant pathology useful." The *Compendium of Rose Diseases*, prepared by R. K. Horst and published by the American Phytopathological Society, is also dedicated to Dr. Westcott. Cynthia Westcott willingly shared what she had learned about plants with the public in several books: *The Plant Doctor*, *Anyone Can Grow Roses*, *Are You Your Garden's Worst Enemy?*, *Garden Enemies*, *The Gardener's Bug Book*, and *The Plant Disease Handbook*. She also wrote an autobiography, *Plant Doctoring is Fun*.

Cynthia Westcott was a member of several professional societies and organizations including the American Phytopathological Society, the Entomological Society of America, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Sigma Delta Epsilon, and the American Horticultural Council. The Northeast Division of the American Phytopathological Society presented their Award of Merit to her in 1969 and she was designated a Fellow of the American Phytopathological Society in 1973. She served on the Board of Directors of the American Horticultural Council and on the Board of Directors of the National Council of State Garden Clubs and was Director-at-Large and Consulting Rosarian of the American Rose Society. Her interests were broad but her primary love was roses. The Garden Club of New Jersey awarded its silver medal horticulture award for 1956 to her for "promoting the rose and its culture all over the United States." At their national convention in 1975, the American Rose Society honored her with a presentation called "This is Your Life, Dr. Cynthia Westcott," and the Jackson and Perkins Co. named a hybrid tea rose "Cynthia" in her honor. Cynthia Westcott's Rose Day was a special day each year when she opened her home and office at Glen Ridge, New Jersey, to the general public and shared her knowledge and hospitality. In her words, "What she learned about gardens, she taught to gardeners throughout the country." The Whetzel-Westcott Lecture Series has been established at Cornell University honoring Dr. Cynthia Westcott, the Plant Doctor, and her beloved and respected Professor Whetzel who encouraged her to go out and doctor plants.

Cynthia Westcott, the Plant Doctor, will long be remembered for her dedicated efforts to help people keep plants healthy.