Natalie Whitford Uhl—Recipient of the 2002 Asa Gray Award


MELISSA LUCKOW
L. H. Bailey Hortorium, Cornell University, 462 Mann Library, Ithaca, New York 14853

THE EARLY YEARS

Natalie Whitford Uhl was born in 1919 and raised on a farm in Rhode Island, the oldest of three girls. Her mother died when Natalie was nine years old, and this was perhaps instrumental in developing some of her personal characteristics such as responsibility, independence, persistence, and optimism. For a woman aspiring to become a scientist in the 1940's, and particularly post-World War II, these were indispensable qualities. As Natalie herself described it: “It was a no-nonsense man's world that I grew up in.”

Natalie entered Rhode Island State College in 1936. Vernon Cheadle was her class advisor there, and fostered her interest in botany and especially the monocots. She worked as a technician in his laboratory during her senior year, and this work was subsequently published as two papers on phloem (Cheadle and Whitford 1940, 1941). After receiving her bachelor's degree at Rhode Island State College, she came to Cornell in September of 1940 and began working on an M.S. in botany under Arthur J. Eames. These were the war years, and with most of the men in the military, the labor shortage was filled by women. Natalie thus spent her summers working on her father's farm in Rhode Island as a tractor driver. She nonetheless managed to pursue her academic interests by working evenings and weekends with Dr. Cheadle on the anatomy of monocotyledons. Tractor driver by day, botanist by night. Natalie remembers this as an ideal time in her life, plowing fields in the sunshine along the coast all day, sometimes punctuated with a swim or a lobster cookout on the beach, followed by an evening at the microtome or microscope studying plant anatomy. She and Cheadle would go collect plants on Sundays, Dr. Cheadle would identify them on Monday, and Natalie would begin the fixing and processing of them for anatomical work that evening. This work also led to two