

LANDSCAPE LEGENDS: Floyd Swink

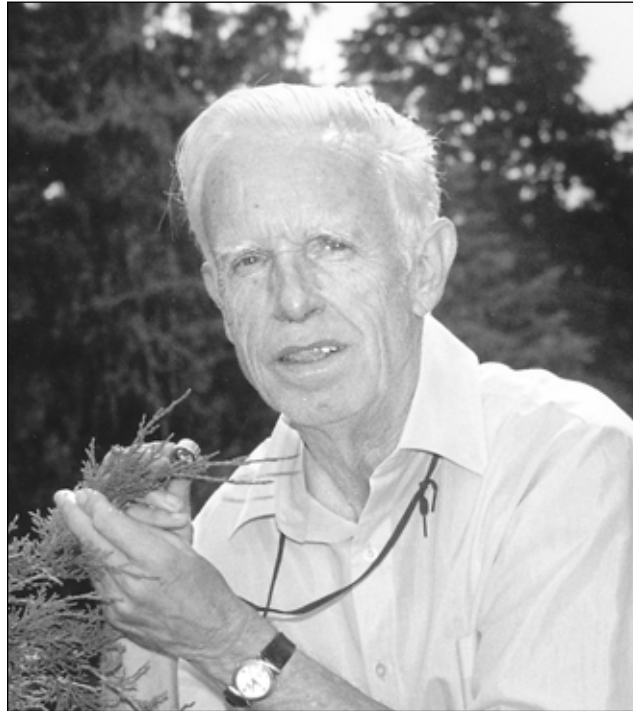
TWG Editor: In the Winter edition, I had the privilege of including an article entitled “Wither Botany?” by Floyd Swink. Though Swink, a noted punster, later suggested that it be retitled, “Whether Botany?”, I received tremendous positive response to the essay from subscribers who asked to know more about this remarkable “landscape legend.” Here are excerpts (with some additions by me) from an excellent article by Vicki Sebela that ran in the 2/4/98 edition of *The Wheaton (IL) Leader*. By the way, I hope to include some “travels with Floyd” stories in future editions.

Born in 1921 in Villa Park and currently residing in Wheaton, IL, Floyd Swink turned his passions of botany and birding into a living and has turned many people throughout the region on to these hobbies, thanks, in part, to the plant, *Buchnera americana*—Blue Hearts (see p. 17). It was 1944 when a newly-married Swink, while in the Indiana Dunes, came upon this rough-leaved, rough-stemmed plant that resembles Phlox. “At that time if you had a plant that you could not identify you went to the *Field Museum*,” explains Swink. It was there that he met famed botanist Paul Standley and his student, Julian Steyermark, who was to become the world’s leading botanist and the authority on plants indigenous to Venezuela.

Carrying on the mentoring tradition, Swink quickly became a student of

Steyermark. Swink spent the better of 13 years with Steyermark as a volunteer apprentice while still working full-time as the senior naturalist for the Cook County Forest Preserve District.

“I had a 24-hour pass to the Field Museum and would often work there until 1 a.m. going over examples of each genus of plant”, recalls Swink. “Steyermark wanted me to learn every



plant genus in the world, and my checklist—with which I was to practice like flash cards—contained 6,000 genera at 60 plants per page, each containing the genus name, family name, number of species, and the country of origin. Impromptu quizzes were often forthcoming from Steyermark (a resident of Barrington) who once said, “If you can know 10 facts, then you can know 20. If you know 20, then you can know 100,” and is listed in the Guinness Book of

World Records for collecting 132,000 specimens of plants, not counting duplicates.

In the late 1940’s, Swink, Steyermark, Margery Carlson, and Evanston industrialist Cyrus Mark formed the *Volo & Wauconda Bog Preservation Committee*, one of the first major conservation projects following Jens Jensen’s and Dwight Perkins’ creation of the Cook County forest preserves.

From the fields of Missouri, to the prairies of Chicago, Swink continued to soar with the likes of Dr. Friedrich Ehrendorfer, a taxonomist from Austria and the world’s authority on Bedstraws [*Galium*]. Swink spent a few days touring the Chicago region’s prairies, marshes, sand dunes, and forests with Ehrendorfer. Impressed by Swink’s knowledge, Ehrendorfer later remarked, “We do not have anybody like Mr. Swink in Europe,” a statement that helped Swink get a job at *The Morton Arboretum* in 1960. Swink was assigned to the education department (then guided by May Theilegard Watts) and to work with Ray Schulenberg to assure the taxonomic accuracy of the Arboretum’s collections.

During his tenure at the Arboretum, Swink has fledged a few experts of his own, among them Bob Betz, America’s leading prairie expert; Todd Bittner, a well-known botanist with the *IL Dept. of Natural Resources*; Craig Johnson, manager of the Arboretum’s prairie; and Gerould Wilhelm, a combined ecologist, author, conservationist and taxonomist. By the early 1950’s, Swink had written *A Guide to the Wild Flowering*

Plants of the Chicago Region and had compiled a list of the region's flora, excluding grasses and sedges. Enlarged from 13 to 22 counties by Schulenberg, by 1969 the first edition of the extraordinary book, *Plants of the Chicago Region*, was published. Later editions of the book were co-written with Wilhelm—also an expert on lichens who now works for *Conservation Design Forum*, an ecological restoration firm located in Elmhurst, IL.

While he is “most proud of the opportunities I have had to train people,” he has had opportunities to help others besides his students. As the voice behind the *Emergency Poison Hotline* of Chicago for the last 46 years, Swink has taken it all in stride. “I suppose I have saved a lot of lives,” he says. “I do not recall a death in all these years—most [calls] end happily. Speed is most definitely a life-saving factor.”

On Dec. 16, 1995, Mr. Floyd Swink became Dr. Floyd Swink, receiving an honorary doctorate of humane letters from *Western IL University*. Said Dr. Donald Spencer, President of WIU, “Floyd has achieved major distinction as a taxonomist. His extraordinary knowledge of plant life, his mastery of the principles of taxonomy and his skills as an author, editor and ecologist leave those who have worked with him over the decades awestruck, overwhelmed, and mentally exhausted by their encounters with Mr. Swink's mastery of his field, gained entirely without benefit of post-secondary education.”

For Swink, an avid birder, the transition between plants and birds was a no-brainer. “Botanists tend to be bird-watchers. I do not go out in the field without a pair of binoculars and a 10-power hand lens,” says Swink. “Birds are relatively easy. There are only 600 species north of the Rio Grande, per-

haps 400 in greater Chicagoland and 220 at the Arboretum. Compare that with the 2,500 flowering plants of the Chicago area alone.”

Just the mention of the name Swink gives even the most avid birder a moment of pause. “He has a power that is remarkable,” says George H. Petrides, Jr., owner of *The Wild Bird Center* in Danada. “People come from everywhere to participate in the Swink walks. He has such a following. He is a built-in crowd maker. People love him, and around here, he is definitely a legend,” says Petrides, the grandson of George A. Petrides, a well-known writer for the *Peterson Field Guides*.

Today, Swink is officially retired from the Arboretum, but still maintains his office and runs the *Poison Control Hotline* from there. He is at work on an updated version of the 1950's *Guide to Wild Flowering Plants* and a list of 10,000 common plant names. Of course, he teaches a variety of classes and, as always, is quick to offer assistance on plants to fledgling horticultural reporters.

What advice does this landscape legend have to offer those who can only hope to someday have one-tenth of the knowledge he has? “Becoming an excellent botanist, birder or naturalist takes practice. It is like taking piano lessons. You cannot become a Van Cliburn if all you are willing to practice is just a half hour each day. If you are really serious and love what you do, commit the time and the excellence will come.” ❀❀❀

TWG Editor: There is much more to know about Floyd Swink—no short article can do his contributions justice. As Gerry Wilhelm said at the kick-off fund-raiser of the *Conservation Research Institute*, “Floyd is an absolutely prodigious observer of all kinds of things:

there is no better botanist, no better birder, no one with more knowledge of the City of Chicago, and no better typist. I'm not kidding! He can type 160 wpm error-free with a nickel balanced on his left hand, with the book upside-down so the words are read backwards, *while* he is reciting the states and capitols in alphabetical order.”

Most importantly, he is married to Marie, who reports that her husband also studies photography, insects, stars, butterflies, and the “most difficult books of the Bible.” The Swink's have three children and five grandchildren.

Swink's favorite prairies—Goose Lake and Tolleston (both located in northwestern Indiana)—have succumbed to development. He admits to being partial to Bluff Spring Fen in Elgin, IL, and to Tefft Prairie in Jasper County, IN.

His favorite native plant in Cook County? The Orange Fringed Orchid [*Habenaria ciliaris*], whose flower “looks like a witch on a broomstick.” Orchids may be a favorite plant. Describing the greenhouses at *Hausermann's Orchids* in Villa Park, IL, Swink dryly comments, “While the plants are not ecologically situated, *Hausermann's* does offer one of the great floral displays in this region.”

I once called *Plants of the Chicago Region* “the greatest gardening book ever written.” I hold fast to this opinion. Buy a copy (\$40; (630) 719-2454) and begin to read: at first, it will be ~~Greek~~ Latin, but soon, you will begin to understand the relationships of plants to one another. Without that, your gardening abilities will always be limited.

Please also call Mr. Swink at (630) 719-2436 and thank him for all his work. He'd enjoy hearing from you.

