

# Elmhurst PUBLIC LIBRARY

Explore • Learn • Grow

## Elmhurst Public Library

125 S. Prospect Avenue

Elmhurst, IL 60126

630-279-8696

reference@elmhurst.org

<http://www.elmhurstpubliclibrary.org/>

King,  
Louisa Yeoman

# A Well-Considered GARDENER

By Cathy J. Maloney



Victorian women were often associated with flowers and gardens. Old

pictures show them demurely holding nosegays, or coyly speaking the Language of Flowers. Floral motifs covered their embroideries, tatting, needlepoint, and other handicrafts. But in terms of sod-busting, weed-whacking toil, the typical leisure class Victorian lady was little more than a hothouse flower herself. Tanned complexions and callused hands were symbols of the lower classes, and heavy skirts and petticoats were not made for grubbing around in the soil. Even here in Illinois, still considered the Wild West by some Victorians, women gardeners were the exception.

Louisa Yeomans King helped American women become more than mere garden ornaments. Founding member of the Garden Club of America (1913), first president and founder of the Woman's National Farm and Garden Association (1914), and prolific writer, Louisa Yeomans King began her gardening career right outside of Chicago. The daughter of a New England clergyman, Louisa moved to Elmhurst,



Portrait of Louisa King, one of the founders of the Garden Club of America, circa 1910. The organizers considered her the only true "westerner" in their midst.

Illinois, as a new bride in 1890.

For the next ten years, Louisa honed her gardening skills in Elmhurst. She credits her early interest and talent in gardening to her mother-in-law, Aurelia King. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly Press* in 1923, she recalls, "My own first gardening is associated with the dear remembrance of Mrs. Henry W. King of Chicago, who long before the gracious art was generally practiced in the middle west, had an old-fashioned formal garden, on the order of that at Mount Vernon, some twenty miles out from Chicago."

The elder Mrs. King had an extensive formal garden, including an herb garden with over 200 varieties, at her Elmhurst estate. Louisa drew inspiration from this garden and from her mother-in-law's practical advice and extensive reading library. Shortly after the turn of the century, she and her husband moved to Alma, Michigan, and it was there that she developed her most accomplished garden and began to write.

Louisa King's writing career spanned over fifteen years and included both magazines and books. Her first book, *"The Well Considered Garden,"*

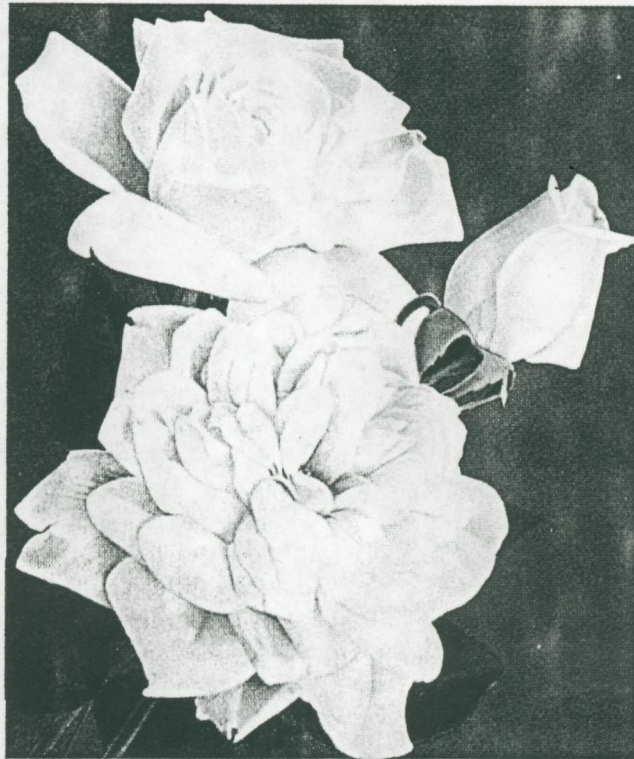
June 29, 1937.

J. H. NICOLAS

Plant Pat. 253

ROSE

Filed Feb. 11, 1937



The Jackson & Perkins catalogue of 1937 describes the new rose "Mrs. Francis King" as having a bloom that is "very large and full, carried on a long upright stem, white drawing to pale gold in the center. It has the pleasing fragrance of wild roses and is a prolific continuous bloomer. Retail at \$1.25 each."



debuted in 1915. Her last, "From a New Garden," (1930) paid tribute to her early Elmhurst years in its dedication to Aurelia King. Her six books are written for the layperson, and focus not so much on horticultural do's and don'ts, as they do on pleasing arrangements of garden design.

"No garden for me without a plan," she admonished in "Flower Garden Day by Day" (1927). "Never make your plans from those occasionally shown in the seed catalogues; the round beds of tulips, the diamond-wise divisions of the small perennial garden. We have come to see that complicated geometrical forms are too elaborate for most lots and most landscapes; that the simpler the design, the better the garden's future."

Although Louisa is best known for her writing, she also played a role in the formation of the Garden Club of America. On April 30, 1913, a group of 24 women met in Philadelphia at the invitation of Mrs. J. Willis Martin and the organization was formed. Louisa, named one of the four vice presidents, was considered the only real "westerner" in the group. The other founders came mostly from the Middle Atlantic states. This was the first national gar-

dening organization.

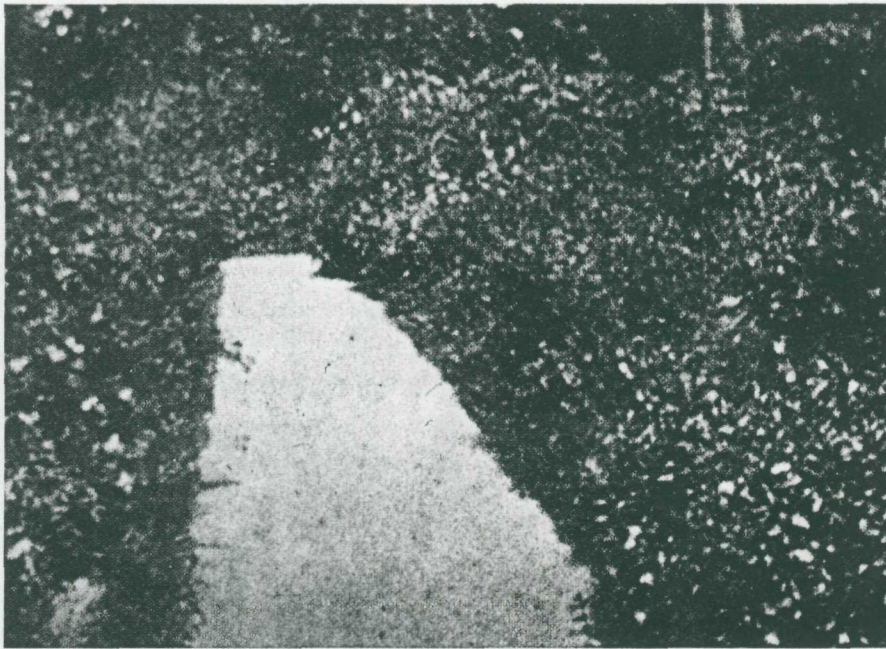
Louisa is often associated with the English gardening luminary, Gertrude Jekyll, her contemporary. The two women were frequent correspondents and had great respect for each other. Louisa's books stress the concepts of planned garden designs, and artistic use of color in plantings—ideas that are synonymous with those of Gertrude Jekyll. Both Jekyll and King, on opposite sides of the Atlantic, had a down-to-earth approach to gardening that was useful for both the cottage garden and lavish estate.

After her husband died in 1927, Louisa returned to the East where

she lived until her death in 1948 at the age of 74. At her request, her ashes were scattered over her garden in South Hartford, New York.

Louisa left a legacy that included her books, numerous articles, and speeches. Her impact has not gone unnoticed. In 1937, a beautiful white rose was patented and introduced bearing her name. In Washington D.C., the National Arboretum features extensive plantings in a memorial garden, the "Mrs. Francis King Dogwood Garden." And here in Chicago, vestiges of Louisa King's early Elmhurst years help us picture the era when women came out of the hothouse and into the garden.

Inventor  
J. H. Nicolas  
By *Robby [unclear]*  
attorneys



The Herb Garden at White Birch which included over 200 varieties

PHOTO COURTESY ELMHURST PARK DISTRICT

## Tour of Louisa King's Gardens

There are two key stops on a tour of Louisa King sites in Elmhurst. First is the home of Henry and Aurelia Case King, Louisa King's in-laws, where she served her gardening apprenticeship. The estate, approximately two city blocks large, stands today as the Elmhurst Public Library in Wilder Park.

### White Birch (Wilder Park)

When the senior Kings inherited the estate in 1888 from wealthy businessman, Seth Wadhams, it was known as "White Birch." Many imported species of trees had been planted to beautify the grounds. Like many other estates of the era, White Birch, originally farmland, was enclosed by tall hedges of arborvitae. Aurelia established her legendary flower and herb gardens on this beautiful property. Louisa King lived nearby and later inherited the estate.

The present day Wilder Park looks vastly different from the old White Birch estate. The conversion from private home to public park has necessitated changes. Although Wilder Park today has lovely land-

scaping, parking lots have replaced the large trees and shrubs near the house itself. None of the original birches which gave the estate its name remains. Mr. Harris Wilder, who lived in the house just after the Kings, and whose family name is memorialized by the park, spoke of their fate in a 1992 interview in "The Elmhurst Gardener."

"Years ago, homes were given a name," he recalled. "Before my family moved into the home (1905), it was owned by the Henry King family. During those days the home was called "White Birch" because there was a multitude of white birch trees. I couldn't begin to tell you how many, but as we all learned, white birch trees are not among the longest-lived trees around here by any means. In 15 or 20 years every one of them died on us. They probably had been there 15 or 20 years before we moved in. . ."

A gardener's cottage was on the southwest corner of the estate. Cow and sheep pastures were established on the northern part of the estate. Although these pastures and the cottage are long gone, the original greenhouse used by Louisa King and her mother-in-law still stands at the south end of Wilder Park. It is thought to be the oldest greenhouse in Du Page County. This greenhouse,

built even before Aurelia King inherited the house, had a Conservatory added to it in 1923. You can easily picture Louisa at her mother-in-law's side, learning about plants in the greenhouse.

The garden to the south of the greenhouse, "Elizabeth's Friendship walk," is a very recent addition which pays tribute to Seth Wadhams's wife, Elizabeth, herself a garden lover. It is not a garden restoration, but is meant to be interpretive of the era.

Of further historical note is the large garden ornament to the west of the greenhouse. This is actually one of the original roof finials from pre-fire Chicago's Courthouse. The ornament was salvaged and moved to White Birch after the fire by persons unknown.

### Hill Cottage

Although Louisa was a frequent visitor to the White Birch estate, (and in fact, lived there for a period in 1898 when her father-in-law died), she had homes of her own in Elmhurst. Her first home, Hill Cottage, with its long colorful history, still remains as a private residence.

The structure known as Hill Cottage had many names, owners, and uses dating back to the 1840s. Not only was a street named after it,



The main house at White Birch, the King estate in Elmhurst, west facade, 1891

but Elmhurst itself was originally named Cottage Hill. The house originated as a tavern, built and owned by the first resident in Elmhurst. In 1891, the house was moved from its hilltop location to its present site by Aurelia King's father, who was then its owner. An apple orchard surrounded the house and it was subsequently named, "Orchard Place."

It was during the early 1890's that

Louisa King and her husband rented Orchard Place/Hill Cottage. In its current location at 413 S. York, you will note that it was but a short walk to her mother-in-law's at White Birch estate.

Louisa and her husband must have had a soft spot in their hearts for this honeymoon cottage since her most famous garden and home in Alma, Michigan was named Orchard House. 🌿

*This article is an excerpt from the author's book in process, tentatively titled, "Chicago's Antique Gardens". Special thanks to Nancy Wilson of the Elmhurst Historical Museum, Ed Hoffmann of the Elmhurst Park District, Carol Doty of the Morton Arboretum, and David McMacken, of Alma, Michigan, for their generous time spent in giving information for this article. (Chicago's Antique Gardens © Cathy Jean Maloney, 1994)*



PHOTO: CATHY J. MALONEY

This roof finial from Chicago's pre-fire Courthouse can be seen west of the greenhouse at White Birch.

## Louisa King's books:

"The Well-Considered Garden", 1915

"The Little Garden," 1921

"Variety in the Little Garden," 1923

"The Beginner's Garden" 1927

"The Flower Garden Day by Day", 1927

"From A New Garden" 1930