

Master Gardener

Lena Pearl Griffin:

Believing in Tomorrow



By Debbie Montgomery

The inscribed stone on Lena Pearl Boutwell Griffin's table best describes her lifelong love of plants and vegetables: Gardening is a way of showing that you believe in tomorrow.

As long as she can remember, the Ripley resident has had her hands in the soil and her palate placated by delicious homegrown fruits and vegetables. Earliest memories involve 4-H projects in her native Newton County.

Meetings were held at the school and it required dedicated membership in the late 1920s. "I had to walk about four miles to get to the meetings. We carried our exhibits to the school building rain or shine," she said.

One-room schools didn't afford many opportunities for classes such as home economics or clothing construction. "What I learned was from my mother and my 4-H leaders," she said. "The publications and 4-H leaders taught me how to make my seams correctly and what types of clothes to wear."



Her exhibit interests included vegetables, canned goods, clothing and leadership, the latter earning her first out-of-state trip and a train ride to the 1933 National 4-H Conference in Chicago. "It was the first time leadership was offered and I represented Mississippi," said Mrs. Lena Pearl, who will turn 90 in October.

Pretty heady stuff for a Newton High School junior, she said, as she unfolded a 70+ year-old 4-H beanie and looked over a group photograph of the event.

Mrs. Lena Pearl continued her education at the former Mississippi State College for Women, graduating in 1938 with a degree in commercial work. She would meet her husband, Paul Griffin of Tippah County, while working in Fayette. He was selling Progressive Farmer magazine when he began courting her. "We married in 1940. They were rationing tires and gas so we moved to Tippah in 1941 and have been living here ever since."

Choosing to remain involved in 4-H, Mrs. Lena Pearl imparted knowledge as a 4-H leader during her 11 years as a high school teacher in locations such as Palmer, Shady Grove and Jumpertown. Later, she assisted her husband with the Massey Ferguson equipment business they owned, all the while raising their four children, Peggy, Linda, James and William.

"The 4-H clubs and different people have always used Mrs. Lena Pearl as a resource because she is so knowledgeable about the plants," said MSU Extension Service county director Tim Needham. "We started a Master Gardener Program in 2001, and Mrs. Lena Pearl was one of the first ones to call and say she wanted to be a Master Gardener."

Mrs. Lena Pearl is quick to give credit for her gardening enthusiasm. "I love to garden. I really attribute our Extension office and their programs and leadership in my education for working with plants."

She has repaid the community many times over, according to Needham. "I don't know how many floral arrangements she makes and just donates but that's her volunteer work, really, to churches, libraries, and different functions all around town."

The Master Gardener program is ideal for both the novice and the more experienced, according to Mrs. Lena Pearl. "I've learned a lot - I've never been to any kind of meeting that I've not learned something."

Perhaps her favorite part is the camaraderie among plant lovers. "The fellowship and inspiration of being with other people and then sometimes, just knowing what you're already doing is OK is important. And then you always learn something new when you go that you didn't already know."

Don't ask the nonagenarian for her favorite season. She likes it all. But if pressed, she'll frown about the dead of winter when Mississippi temperatures are just too cold to be outside. And she won't choose a favorite among the more than 200 perennials, annuals, fruit and nut trees, vegetables or herbs. If pressed

for a favorite, she'll reply, "The one that survives the easiest!" She eventually endorsed the rose because of its productivity during the summer months. When harvest time comes, she'll pick from two to three varieties of corn, watermelon, lettuce and spinach, to name a few.

While her front yard is landscaped beautifully with flowerbeds filled with perennials, the massive side lot is filled with 24 raised beds. "My beds are 16 feet by 4 feet with 3-foot aisles. I like these because I can break them up one bed at a time," she said.

Her arsenal: A five-prong pitchfork, a shovel and a hoe.

Needham said there's no gardening crew. "Mrs. Lena Pearl turns all of it over herself."

She confirms it: "I do it all but cut the grass," a chore her daughter-in-law Sharon fulfills with a riding lawnmower over the centipede lawn.

Mrs. Lena Pearl encourages the use of raised beds, self-sufficiency, and avoiding additives and preservatives. "If I want to plant butterbeans in one bed, I can go in there and plant my butterbeans. I put up all my vegetables; I don't have to buy any." She usually doesn't have to purchase fruit either, but last summer's harvest failed to net any blueberries so she put up 9 gallons of the store-bought berry. "I eat a cup of blueberries every morning with my cereal," she said.

Ripley's favorite gardener has spent the winter thumbing through seed books and thinking about planting. "I usually try to find new varieties that have come out and may be more prolific. I've already ordered new seeds for squash and lettuce."

She also enjoys other Master Gardener experiences, including a kudzu basketweaving course. "I made so many mistakes that my daughter said we would call this the 'forgiving basket'," she said.

When not outside gardening, Mrs. Lena Pearl enjoys her solar plant room built more than 30 years ago. Cuttings, tropical houseplants and spring tomato plants are thriving in the space adjacent to the family den.

Frankly, there's not a room in the Griffin home that doesn't contain some end result of Mrs. Lena Pearl's hands - plants and dried floral arrangements bedeck furniture, and her art adorns the walls. Acrylic paintings of farm scenes, floral and fowl, all by the Master Gardener, show another side of the talented woman. Among her favorites: her father with his ice wagon, and another of husband Paul with his Border Collies and sheep.

For this nonagenarian, gardening is enjoyment. She doesn't let the labor overwhelm her. "If it does, I just don't do it," she said, laughing. "I've got enough to keep busy all the time. It's for pleasure, but it's good for me. Physical exercise keeps the mind sharp and something to look forward to."