

# Berry breeder, 92, tells how to grow, grow old

GLENN DALE, Md. — At 92, famed strawberry breeder George M. Darrow is slow to give you the usual tips on how to grow "old." He promises to talk about that after he's had time to learn.

Mention berries, though, and the native Vermonter stretches his tall, lean frame nearly to his full height. That's a subject he knows well.

"When I first went to work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1911," he said with a twinkle in his eyes, "they took one look at me and figured I was too green to keep in Washington. So they shipped me off to Oregon to study the better handling of cherries and berries. Then I made similar studies with citrus fruits in Florida."

Darrow recalls that the next assignment of his 46-year USDA career involved surveying the fruit crops of Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia to determine the best fruits grown there and why. For this assignment, he visited home gardeners and commercial growers who grew cherries, apples, pears, peaches, plums, strawberries, blackberries and raspberries.

From Darrow's point of view, he was broadening his education. His "teachers" lived on the sloping hills and up the hollows.

What these people taught Darrow, he said, was as helpful to his scientific work as his horticulture degree from Cornell University, his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University, or his advanced studies in plant physiology and genetics.

From the start, Darrow recalls, he got along well with the mountain people who had grown wise in the ways of plants while propagating wild fruits.

In the Kentucky mountains, a young man with a mule met me at the train station. The mule was to carry me and my luggage," he said.

"We went over a mountain and

down into a valley, where I met a big man at the crossroads. It was said that when there was trouble in those parts, he administered justice. He would even go into court with people in disputes. Then he would take the people home. He settled things rightly.

"After about two years in those mountains, I was directed by the USDA to write a farmer's bulletin on each fruit. I did the most on strawberries. I told about the strong and weak points of each variety.

"I also wrote about strawberries on the Pacific coast...everbearing strawberries...all different kinds. These bulletins came out in 1918-19 and have been revised from time to time over the years."

With the advent of World War I, Darrow joined the Army in June, 1918, and went to camp in Georgia, where he still found time to experiment with plants. In August, 1919 he left the Army and got married a few days later.

By this time, Darrow was a recognized authority on small fruits. His writings covered raspberries, blackberries and dewberries, currants and gooseberries.

"I surveyed cranberries that first fall after I got married," he remembers. "I had been in Oregon and Washington State. My cranberry travels also took me to Massachusetts, New Jersey and Wisconsin, the main areas where cranberries were grown."

Then the prolific scientist began the work that was to make his name virtually synonymous with the word "strawberry." Following his military years in Georgia, he borrowed part of the greenhouse of an associate in 1919 and began breeding in quest of superior market and garden strawberries.

Darrow's long and patient efforts literally bore fruit on USDA grounds first in Glenn Dale and later at USDA's agricultural research center in Beltsville.

"I could take you to the spot

where we picked our early strawberry cross in about 1921 or 1922," he said. "It's where the Glenn Dale golf course is now. We bred bigger, better-tasting, disease-resistant strawberries there. These were especially needed by the preserving industry, which was having trouble using berries available at that time."

"One of the first crosses we ever made struck it good. It was excellent for making strawberry jam. We named it the Blakemore after one of the most outstanding people in the strawberry preserving business. He was instrumental in cleaning up the industry."

"For about 30 years, the Blakemore was the leading strawberry variety in the country, mostly in the South," he said.

Since surpassed in some areas by bigger-fruited types, the Blakemore still is a major variety in Arkansas and Oklahoma. As the tastes and needs for strawberries changed, Darrow and his associates originated new plants.

USDA moved its fruit research, including strawberry breeding, to Beltsville, Md., in 1932. The first strawberry plots were on heavy soil and many plants died from a disease which later was found to be widespread throughout the northern half of the United States.

Darrow and his co-workers devised screening techniques for the disease, which involved growing the seedlings in a cool greenhouse in beds of wet, disease-infested soil. This procedure proved very successful as a means of eliminating susceptible seedlings and became a routine part of the breeding program.

In the 1940's the importance of virus diseases in strawberries became widely recognized. Transmitted mainly by aphids, the disease infected many plants even before they produced runners. The battle against the disease and aphids began.

Under the leadership of Darrow and others, strawberry growers propagated "clean" plants, grew them in isolation and controlled aphids by systematic spraying.

The result: plants with stronger vigor and higher productivity as well as more berries at the grocery store.

Describing all of the honors that have come to Darrow for his scholarly achievements would fill many pages.

Recognition has come to Darrow from many places in government and education as well as from the small fruit industry. Before he retired in 1957, former Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace termed Darrow "one of the great strawberry experts of the world."

North Carolina State University honored him with an honorary Doctor of Science degree for his contributions to agriculture in the South.

Darrow was in the first class of 'Fellows of the American Society for Horticultural Science' and has been awarded the Wilder Medal, given each year by the American Pomological Society to an outstanding contributor to American fruit varieties. In recent years, the North American Blueberry Council named him a "Pioneer of American Blueberry Develop-

ment."

Each year, the American Society for Horticultural Science honors the author of the best paper written about small fruits culture. The honor is called the "George M. Darrow Award."

People sometimes see Darrow in different ways. When an exhibit on his work with strawberries opened at the National Agricultural Library of the USDA's Science and Education Administration, a friend commented that Darrow should be cited for his work with daylilies rather than for his strawberry research.

"No," said another. "Bamboo-growing is what he does best. His home in Glenn Dale is known as 'Darrow's Grove.' The first bamboo he planted came from China. Most of his bamboo grows 30 feet tall and is good for decorating a home or business, inside and out."

"Not so," said a third. "The new types of cranberries and blueberries he developed while with the USDA are the greatest."

Perhaps a more vivid image of the total man is mirrored in a dozen or so pairs of shoes in Darrow's bedroom. None are styled for black tie events. All were made for walking in the fields where food plants grow.

## FFA launches bologna project

LEBANON — The semi-annual project of the Anville-Cleona Little Dutchman FFA Chapter — the production and sale of Lebanon sweet bologna — has been launched for this year.

Production of the bologna took place on Tuesday at Bomberger's Bologna, Inc., Lebanon.

It is expected that sales from this year's production will top the 3000 pounds sold last fall and this spring.

The bologna project was started in 1964 with the slaughtering of a

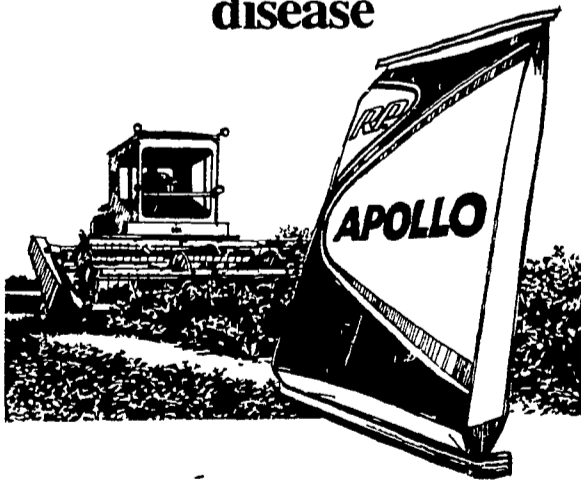
steer by the chapter in the high school vo-ag shop. Sales totaled 300 pounds the first year — just one-tenth of the present level of sales.

Following the adoption of meat inspection requirements by the state, the Little Dutchmen Chapter project was moved to Burkholder's Bologna, Inc. When this plant was closed, it was moved to Bomberger's.

The Chapter's Bologna Committee includes Steve Hostetter, chairman, Jeff Reigel, Tim Theal and Henry Martin.

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