

Pages and petals unite Southern gardeners

By **Barbara Bamberger Scott**
JOURNAL BOOK REVIEWER

BECOMING ELIZABETH LAWRENCE: *Discovered Letters of a Southern Gardener.* Edited by Emily Herring Wilson. John F. Blair. 224 pages. \$19.95.

"You were very sweet, dear Ann, to take so much trouble with the outline. I went to work with the scissors and a box of pins and moved the paragraphs around as you suggested. I had three left over." Written by Elizabeth Lawrence to her close friend Ann Bridgers, this snippet is one of many in a collection of letters giving new insight into the delightful mind of an energetic woman who was one of North Carolina's most respected landscape gardeners. Also a writer best known for her book *A Southern Garden*, Elizabeth is here revealed as a poet, family member and friend whose private life of letters to Ann gave her intellectual and emotional sustenance.

From 1932 to 1948, Elizabeth and the older Ann, a playwright, were neighbors on Hillsborough Street in Raleigh, where a charming community comes alive through Elizabeth's letters. When Ann retreated to her cabin in the mountains, Elizabeth would watch her house, sometimes planting new flowers in her garden to delight her on her return. Elizabeth wrote to many people; her last work, *Gardening for Love*, published

posthumously, was drawn from thousands of letters to and from her "farm ladies" about their successes and failures with seeds and plant varieties. But for Ann, she saved her deeper thoughts in intimate communications that read almost like a conversation with herself, and signed them, "Your loving Elizabeth."

An example is this excerpt, revealing not only Elizabeth's musings of the day but also a memory of a visit to Ann's little aerie near Weaverville: "It must really be spring this time for the wildflowers are beginning to push up, and the sky is very blue. This morning I went out and found an hepatica in bloom ... one that I got from the mountains last fall ... and it is the frailest, loveliest thing I ever saw."

Through these selections, carefully chosen by Emily Herring Wilson, a Winston-Salem writer and the 2007 John Tyler Caldwell Laureate, one gets the feeling that Elizabeth was always gathering ideas and reflections to share with Ann, from daily family vignettes to serious opinions on books or current events and commentary on the progress of her own inner life as an author.

As a devoted but scatterbrained gardener myself, I especially enjoyed a description of Elizabeth's visit to a nursery with her mother Bessie, also an avid gardener. Elizabeth had planned to use a system Ann had suggested, carefully



Becoming Elizabeth Lawrence is the story of a long-lasting friendship.

making an alphabetized list of necessary purchases, but, she wails, "Bessie got everything she saw ... and I dashed around madly trying to check the list, and in the end we had no more idea than usual of what we had gotten and hadn't gotten."

How comforting to learn that even an expert can be overwhelmed by the excitement and beauty of plants, and buy purely on impulse.

Ann influenced, indeed inspired, Elizabeth to write in a clear, organized fashion. Ann was the more public person (she started the Raleigh Little Theatre and had a play on Broadway), but she needed seclusion and craved Elizabeth's praise. Elizabeth, though seeming shy, relished the chance to meet new people and reach out to other gardeners. With Ann's advice she gradually learned to harness her abilities as an author. Like most creative people, she was always ready for the next thing, and in the late 1940s she and Bessie moved to Charlotte, where Elizabeth firmly established herself as a noted landscape gardener, contributing hundreds of gardening columns to *The Charlotte Observer*.

What emerges from *Becoming Elizabeth Lawrence* is a portrait of a brilliant, multitalented, optimistic woman in her prime, thinking beyond home and neighborhood to network and develop a following, with the assistance of a special friend who gave her guidance and was clearly more than a teacher. As Wilson says, "For Elizabeth's perspective, writing to Ann was the delight of her life. From a reader's perspective, the correspondence reveals the steps by which Elizabeth became one of America's best-known writers of classical garden literature."

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