

Alaska plant pioneers receive lifetime award - WILD ABOUT 'EM: Verna and Frank Pratt are as appreciated as the botany they revere.

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The Anchorage Chapter of the Alaska Master Gardeners gave out their first ever Lifetime Achievement Award to Verna and Frank Pratt on Monday night. The award was a large granite stone, suitable for the garden, of course, with an attached plaque that read, "In Recognition of Your Knowledge and Dedication to Teaching Others to Appreciate and Understand the Wildflowers of Alaska."

Or, as Julie Riley said when introducing the award, "For your ability to teach and teach and teach and run up mountains with people following you."

The Pratts received a warm standing ovation from the room full of gardeners, who all have benefitted in one way or another from the Pratts' collective knowledge of Alaska plants. Verna grinned from ear to ear and was left speechless while Frank wanted to set the record straight: Even though he received credit for photographing the flowers and Verna was known as the botanist, Frank wanted to make sure everyone knew Verna was a professional photographer as well. Cake, ice cream and sparkling cider followed the award.

The Pratts came to Alaska in 1966. Verna is known for her incredible depth of knowledge of Alaska plants and her field trips in Denali National Park and to the Seward Peninsula, where participants get down nose to posey to study the wildflowers. The Pratts have published the books, "Field Guide to Alaskan Wildflowers," "Wildflowers along the Alaska Highway," "Wildflowers of Denali National Park," "Alaska's Wild Berries," a children's book, "Linnaea's World," and a journal useful for field trips. The guides are considered bibles when venturing afield.

The award followed a program on heirloom seeds given by Cooperative Extension Service horticulturist Julie Riley that started out with a video on the Seed Savers Exchange. Headquartered in Decorah, Iowa, Seed Savers Exchange now boasts a membership of over 8,000 people worldwide, dedicated to preserving the value of genetic diversity in flowers, fruits and vegetables. The video was followed by a discussion about identifying and preserving Alaska heirloom plants.

Are you aware of any plants or flowers that have been grown in Alaska for a very long time? A potato was recently identified in Southeast Alaska as having been in cultivation by Native Alaskans in the area for over 100 years. A rhubarb plant found in Kodiak was possibly brought over by Russian explorers. A strawberry from Sitka and one from Haines were also mentioned. Anything else?

Although the definition of what constitutes an heirloom plant has not been precisely defined, it is generally accepted to be a plant that has been grown for a long time and is open-pollinated but non-hybridized. Please let us know if you have been growing anything or know of a plant with a long Alaska history.