



Smithsonian Gardens

W. Atlee Burpee & Company records - Accretion 1

2020

Archives of American Gardens
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Gardens
Title:	W. Atlee Burpee & Company records - Accretion 1
Identifier:	AAG.BUR1
Date:	1882-1980 (bulk 1890-1930)
Extent:	2.25 Cubic feet (2 boxes)
Creator:	W. Atlee Burpee Company Burpee, W. Atlee (Washington Atlee), 1858-1915 Burpee, David Wm. Henry Maule (Firm)
Language:	English
Summary:	The W. Atlee Burpee & Company records - Accretion 1, dated circa 1882-1980, document the firm's business activities developing plant varieties and marketing and selling seeds. They include seed trial records, administrative files, seed catalogs, promotional and instructional materials, awards, reference materials, and other items relating to the company and some of its competitors.

Administrative Information

Related Materials

Burpee seed catalogs donated to the Smithsonian in 1982 by the W. Atlee Burpee Company can be found in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History Branch Library Trade Literature Collection.

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Gardens, W. Atlee Burpee & Company Records.

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Biographical / Historical

Washington Atlee Burpee (1858-1915) began a mail-order poultry and livestock business in 1876 in Philadelphia, which he soon expanded to include corn seed for chicken feed. In 1878, he founded W. Atlee Burpee & Co. to sell livestock and vegetable, fruit, and flower seeds through the mail. His company went on to become one of the most notable seed distributors in the world.

In 1888, W. Atlee bought a tract of land named Fordhook Farms in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. It was initially established as an experimental farm to test and evaluate new varieties of vegetables and flowers and to produce seeds for the mail-order market. Burpee spent many summers traveling throughout the United States and Europe visiting farms and searching for the best flowers and vegetables. Certain plants he found were shipped back to the firm for testing and propagation; other seeds were obtained through contracts with growers throughout the U.S., a practice common in the seed industry at that time. Promising varieties were bred with healthier specimens to produce hardier hybrids that were more resistant to disease. Other Burpee trial grounds were later established at Sunnybrook Farm near Swedesboro, New Jersey, and at Floradale Farm in Lompoc, California (1909/1910). The company went on to purchase more land for farming in California, and established sales branch headquarters in Sanford, Florida (c. 1930s), Clinton, Iowa (1942), and Riverside, California (1949).

W. Atlee Burpee married Blanche Simons (1863-1948) in 1892. They had three sons: David (1893-1980); W. Atlee Jr. ("Junior") (1894-1966); and Stuart Alexander (1901-1934). Both David and Junior attended the Blight School in Philadelphia for elementary school and Culver Military Academy in Culver, Indiana for preparatory school. While they both attended Cornell University as undergraduates, they left before graduating due to W. Atlee's poor health. Junior married Jeanetta Lee (1893-1981) in November 1916, and they had two children: W. Atlee III (1917-1971) and Jeanette (1919-2002). David married Lois Torrance (1912-1984) in 1938, and they had two children: Johnathan (b. 1941) and Blanche (b. 1943). Stuart Alexander was apparently born with a disability; according to census records he worked on farms during his lifetime.

David Burpee took over the family business upon his father's death in 1915; Junior served as treasurer of the firm once he returned from military service. At that time, the Burpee company had 300 employees and was the largest mail-order seed company in the world. It distributed over one million catalogs a year and received on average 10,000 orders a day. Under David's tutelage, the company adapted to contemporaneous shifts in business and advertising methods, advancements in plant science, ever-changing consumer demands, and two World Wars. In response to food shortages experienced during World War I, the Burpee company helped promote a "war gardens" campaign that evolved into a "victory gardens" campaign during World War II.

Both W. Atlee and David used their position as head of a major seed house to lobby congressional debates in regard to two topics: postage rates (W. Atlee) and the designation of a national floral emblem for the United States (David). Additionally, both men belonged to the Union Club of Philadelphia and The Canadian Society of Philadelphia (which W. Atlee helped found), and served on the boards of directors for hospitals and other charitable organizations. Both father and son were politically aligned with the Republican Party.

The firm reorganized its governing structure in 1917 at which time it changed its name from W. Atlee Burpee & Co. to W. Atlee Burpee Co. Burpee's acquired three seed companies between 1878 and 1970: Luther Burbank Seed Company, James Vick's Seeds, Inc., and the William Henry Maule Company. David Burpee sold the company to the General Foods Corporation in 1970 and served as a consultant for the business until 1973. The Burpee brand was bought by its current owner, George J. Ball, Inc., in 1991.

Scope and Contents

This accretion to the W. Atlee Burpee & Co. records documents aspects of the W. Atlee Burpee & Co., a mail-order seed company based in Philadelphia that was founded in 1876 by W. Atlee Burpee. It includes seed trial records; administrative and personnel records; trade literature (published by both the Burpee company and a few of its competitors); awards and certificates received by the company; and a few personal papers of David Burpee, W. Atlee's son and business successor.

Arrangement

Collection is arranged into four series:

- Series 1: Plant/Farm Related Material
- Series 2: Business Records
- Series 3: Awards and Certificates
- Series 4: Burpee Family Papers

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Agriculture
Business
Flowers
Gardens -- United States
Horticulture
Mail-order business
Seed industry and trade
Trial gardens
Vegetables
advertising

Types of Materials:

Business records
Correspondence
Pamphlets
Trade catalogs

Container Listing

Series 1: Plant/Farm Related Records, 1905-1921

Records related to the W. Atlee Burpee company's plant and farm operations. The material documents the company's technical advancements in plant science and the firm's non-seed products.

1.1: Crops, 1921

Records related to the search for, development, and management of plants grown by the Burpee company.

Box 5, Folder 14 Flower Seed Trials, 1921

1.2: Products, 1905

Various products sold by the Burpee company in addition to seeds and livestock.

Box 295, Folder 5 Postcard, W. Atlee Burpee and Henry Eckford, 1905

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Series 2: Business Records, circa 1882-1986

Records that document the firm's business and administrative operations.

2.1: Administrative Records

Records related to the structure, organization, and running of the company's business operations. The series includes administrative and policy files; papers related to merger opportunities, administrative consultants, and the sale of the company to General Foods Corporation in 1970; and personnel and employment files.

2.1.A: Personnel

Staff files and papers generated or compiled by company staff.

Box 294, Folder 27	The Seedsman's Trial Grounds, Article by W. Atlee Burpee in Selection in Seed Growing: Embracing Papers Read at the World's Horticultural Congress. Philadelphia: W. Atlee Burpee & Co., 1894
Box 295, Folder 5	The Story of New Flowers for 1938, Address by David Burpee, 1937
Box 294, Folder 1	Charles Oakford Dispute, 1902-1903

2.2: Advertising

Files related to Burpee's extensive advertising and marketing efforts. Included are a catalog proof and customer testimonials.

2.2.A: Ad Copy, Graphics, Mock-ups and Proofs

Page proofs used in the creation of Burpee catalogs.

Box 294, Folder 12	Burpee's Farm Annual Covers Proof, 1904
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2.2.B: Customer Testimonials

A major component of W. Atlee Burpee's business philosophy was creating a product the consumer could trust. One method of instilling this trust was highlighting customer testimonials in the company's trade literature. This subseries contains excerpts of customer testimonials.

Box 294, Folder 2	Fordhook Famous Cucumber Testimonials, 1902
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2.3: Burpee Subsidiaries

The Burpee company involved itself with the acquisition of three seed companies between 1878 and 1970 when it was sold to General Foods Corporation: William Henry Maule Company, James Vick's Seeds, Inc., and the Luther Burbank Seed Company.

2.3.A: Luther Burbank Seed Company

Upon the death of Luther Burbank (1849-1926)—an esteemed horticulturalist and plant scientist, as well as a Burpee relative—the rights to his experiments and business property were initially purchased by Stark Brothers Nurseries of Louisiana, Missouri. Stark subsequently sold limited rights to Burbank's business and name to the Burpee company. Included is material generated by the Burbank firm prior to Burpee's purchase of company rights.

Box 295, Folder 7 Burbank's Experiment Farms, Santa Rosa, California, 1908

2.3.B: Wm. Henry Maule Co.

William Henry Maule was a lifelong friend and early business partner of W. Atlee Burpee. He became involved with Benson, Burpee & Co. in 1877 and then continued his partnership with Benson (Benson, Maule & Co.) until embarking on a business under his own name in 1885. The Burpee firm purchased the assets of Maule's in 1926, and then incorporated it in 1927. In 1947, Burpee's officially merged with the William Henry Maule Company.

This subseries includes bound copies of Maule's Seed Book, many annotated with sales figuresions added.

Box 294, Folder 3	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy with sales annotations), 1926
Box 294, Folder 4	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy for Harry Schmidt with sales annotations), 1928
Box 294, Folder 5	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy for W. Atlee Burpee, Jr. with sales annotations), 1929
Box 294, Folder 6	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy for Chas. L. Atlee), 1930
Box 294, Folder 7	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy for 'Sales' with annotations), 1934
Box 294, Folder 8	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy with sales annotations), 1935
Box 294, Folder 9	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy for 'Sales' with annotations), 1937
Box 294, Folder 10	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy for 'Sales' with annotations), 1938
Box 294, Folder 11	Maule's Seed Book (bound copy for 'Sales' with annotations), 1939

2.4: Professional Activities and Outreach

Records related to Burpee company events and advocacy campaigns.

2.4.A: Advocacy

Documents pertaining to the issue of postal rates that t. The Burpee company lobbied on behalf of due to its effect on the firm's mail order business.

Box 294, Folder 13 Postal Reform Petition Forms, circa 1900-1904

2.4.B: Events

Records documenting events held at Fordhook Farms.

Box 295, Folder 5 Recital and Tea at Fordhook Farms Program, 1986

2.5: Materials Published by the Burpee Company, circa 1882-1918

Printed matter published by the Burpee company for its customers including catalogs, notices, special offer lists, order forms, and instructional materials.

2.5.A: Notices, Lists, Order Forms, etc.

Various mailing cards, notices, circulars, and order forms distributed to Burpee customers.

Box 294, Folder Sales flyers, leaflets, inserts, envelopes, order forms, etc., circa 1882-1918
14-25 *13 Folders*

2.5.B: Instructional Materials

"How-to" manuals and other material published by the company on a variety of agricultural topics.

Box 294, Folder Instructional Leaflets, 1899-1916
28-30; *6 Folders*

Box 295, Folder 1-3

Box 295, Folder 4 Burpee's Vest-Pocket Guide to Culture of Flowers, 1915, 1918
2 Booklets

2.5.C: Seed Packets

An assortment of Burpee seed packets, ranging from late-nineteenth-century examples lacking images to packets with colorfully photographed images distributed in the 1970s.

Assorted Burpee seed packets are also found in various files throughout the collection.

Box 294, Folder 26 Seed Packets, circa 1890-1903

2.6: Burpee Library/Reference Materials

Printed material collected by the firm for general reference purposes including competitors' trade literature and agricultural journals.

2.6.A: Competitors' Catalogs and Trade Literature

Catalogs, notices and circulars, envelopes, and miscellaneous publications generated by Burpee's competitors.

Box 295, Folder 7	F. B. Mills, Seedsman, Rose Hill, New York, 1905
Box 295, Folder 7	Salbach's Gardens, Berkeley, California, circa 1925-1940
Box 295, Folder 7	Advance Offering Bulbs for Autumn Planting, Stumpp & Walter Co., New York, New York, 1931
Box 295, Folder 7	Vigoro, circa 1935-1950
Box 295, Folder 7	Robert Bolton & Son, Essex, England (catalog envelope), 1952

2.6.B: Agricultural Reference

Home, garden, agricultural, and lifestyle publications; technical essays and journals covering plant science, propagation, and pests; and books on a variety of agricultural topics.

Box 295, Folder 6	The Farm Journal, 1904 <i>3 issues (object groupings)</i>
Box 295, Folder 6	The Practical Farmer, Christmas Number, 1908

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Series 3: Awards and Certificates, circa 1920-1977

Awards and certificates received by the company for the breeding and production of specific plant varieties and various exhibits.

Box 295, Folder 8	Miscellaneous Awards, 1920-1949 <i>1 Folder</i>
Box 295, Folder 9	All-America Selections, 1938-1942 <i>1 Folder</i>
Box 295, Folder 10	All-America Selections, 1945-1977 <i>1 Folder</i>

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Series 4: Burpee Family Papers, 1978, 1980

Personal papers generated and compiled by Burpee family members.

4.1: W. Atlee Burpee (1858-1915)

Records related to the firm's various branches and properties that primarily document logistical and operational functions aspects.

Box 5, Folder 13 Visiting List, 1890

4.2: David Burpee (1893-1980)

Box 295, Folder 11 Kishwaukee College Diploma, 1978

Box 295, Folder 11 New York Times Obituary, June, 1980

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