

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Behind the Business: From Birds to Seeds

Chris Beytes

Celebrating its 136th anniversary this year, W. Atlee Burpee & Co. of Warminster, Pennsylvania, is America's best-known name in gardening. But who was W. Atlee Burpee? And how did the company that bears his name become so synonymous with flower and vegetable seeds?

It starts with birds. Pigeons, actually.

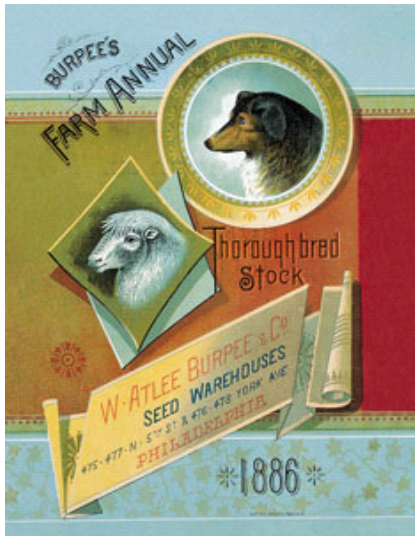
Washington Atlee Burpee was born in 1858 into a well-to-do family of physicians who, like most educated, professional families, expected the next generation to follow in the footsteps of the previous. W. Atlee, however, had a different interest: breeding. Of birds of all things, at first pigeons and then poultry, and even dogs (border collies were a specialty) and livestock. Something of a prodigy, he had by his teens been published in international scholarly journals on the topic of animal breeding. (One humorous anecdote: A party of eminent English breeders came to America to meet this international breeding expert. They were a bit taken aback to discover he was just 16 years old.)



Company founder and namesake W. Atlee Burpee.

The Burpee catalog of 1886 sold animals, not seeds.

Photos courtesy W. Atlee Burpee & Co.



Not that he didn't give medicine a try. To please his father, the young Burpee enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. But he dropped out after a year. Medicine was not for him. Instead, he borrowed \$1,000 from his mother to start a mail-order poultry business, quickly gaining recognition in the region for the quality of his hatchlings. But his business would soon expand in a new direction.

Visiting his customers on their small farms in the Northeast, Midwest and plains states, they would sometimes complain about the quality and yield of their vegetable crops (most often blaming themselves or God or bad luck for their poor results, instead of their substandard seed). After hearing this over and over, W. Atlee decided to expand his catalog poultry business with vegetables selected from the best European

breeders. Soon, Burpee was the world's fastest-growing mail-order seed business (he had also expanded his livestock offerings by this time to include hogs, sheep, goats and cows).

It was during his annual buying trips to Europe that W. Atlee made a fortuitous discovery: Thinking back to his complaining customers, more often than not it was farmers of Northern European descent—German, Dutch or Scandinavian, growing varieties from their native country—who were having the most trouble. He linked the latitude of their farms to latitudes of the points of origin of the old-world varieties they were growing. Germany's latitude (48 to 54) is equivalent to Canada, which explained why German varieties might not fare well in New Jersey (latitude 39 to 41).

Armed with this revelation, W. Atlee began traveling to Europe to seek out varieties, especially off-types and novelties, that he thought would perform in America's climate. He began trialing his varieties and studying other's, looking for the genetic keys to success. But the real breakthrough came in 1888, when W. Atlee bought a farm near Philadelphia called Fordhook. There, he began vegetable breeding and selection in earnest, with the goal of "making American vegetables in America," as current Burpee Chairman and CEO George Ball puts it.

By the 1890s, W. Atlee Burpee was churning out amazing new breakthroughs in vegetables. Well-known varieties (still grown today) include Iceberg lettuce (the first true crisp head lettuce and the foundation of salad bars worldwide), Golden Bantam sweet corn (the first yellow sweet corn; note that it's named for a chicken), Fordhook bush lima bean (the first non-vining lima bean) and Black Beauty eggplant (the first uniform, large-fruited purple eggplant).

Despite his initial success with poultry, W. Atlee had found his niche in vegetables, and by the time of his death in 1915, Burpee was sending out a million seed catalogs a year to market farmers and gardeners. Under command of W. Atlee's son, David, Burpee would continue with breakthroughs, including the ubiquitous Big Boy tomato.

And to think we owe it all to pigeons. **GT**