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Becoming Elizabeth Lawrence

Discovered Letters of a Southern Gardener edited by Emily Herring Wilson

“*Becoming Elizabeth Lawrence* is a book about the art of gardening, the lost art of letter writing, and the art of friendship—in sum, the art of living,” says editor Emily Herring Wilson, who discovered a treasure trove of Elizabeth Lawrence’s letters to her mentor, Ann Preston Bridgers.

Elizabeth Lawrence was the first female graduate of the landscape design program at what is now N.C. State University. Yet she struggled to make a career in Raleigh in the mid-1930s, a time of little work for landscape designers, especially women in the South.

Enter Ann Bridgers. A founder of the Raleigh Little Theatre, Ann was the coauthor of *Coquette*, a Broadway hit starring Helen Hayes and a film for which Mary Pickford won an Oscar. Ann’s knack for discovering talent led her to develop a friendship and correspondence with Elizabeth that endured until Ann’s death in 1967.

They were two women of different generations (Ann was the older) who did not conform to popular images of the Southern lady. Ann encouraged Elizabeth to find a way to live as she wished and guided her writing toward articles for women’s magazines, and gardening magazines in particular. That effort was so successful that Elizabeth’s *A Southern Garden* was published in 1942. The book is still considered a classic.

Emily Wilson explains, “The narrative of the letters follows waves of enthusiasms and discouragements, the very journey that transformed Elizabeth from a compliant daughter of the South into the region’s foremost writer of garden literature, a genre in which personal opinion triumphs.” The letters are “not only revealing about the life of Lawrence but about the period in which most were written—the 1930s, as Elizabeth’s career was beginning, and the 1940s, when wartime activities in Raleigh and the ongoing cultural life of the capital jostled side by side.”

Some letters describe the evenings when Elizabeth and her mother entertained soldiers on leave. Others portray Elizabeth’s mischievous triumphs, one in particular when she patronizes America’s most famous woman landscape designer, Ellen Biddle Shipman. But what makes these letters memorable are the vivid observations of the daily life of “an inquisitive person looking under every mossy stone for a little drama that will entertain,” says Wilson.

Elizabeth found her dream life living and gardening at home, as shown through her letters to Ann Bridgers. “The private life and times of a single woman is nowhere more delightfully rendered,” says Wilson.

In 2004, Elizabeth Lawrence was posthumously named by *Horticulture* magazine as one of the twenty-five greatest gardeners in the world. That acclaim would never have come without her friendship and correspondence with Ann Preston Bridgers.

Today, one can visit the home and garden Elizabeth made in Charlotte after moving from Raleigh in 1948. That property at 348 Ridgewood Avenue is now open to the public, thanks to the Garden Conservancy and Wing Haven Gardens & Bird Sanctuary. And thanks to Emily Herring Wilson, Lawrence fans can differentiate between the private woman and the public image, see how to live a good life in hard times, celebrate the bonds of friendship, and rediscover the lost art of letter writing in a time when most of us only read and write e-mails to communicate with family and friends.

The *New York Times* called Emily Herring Wilson’s *Two Gardeners: Katharine S. White & Elizabeth Lawrence—A Friendship in Letters* “one of the finest gardening books published in years.” Wilson is also the author of the acclaimed Elizabeth Lawrence biography *No One Gardens Alone*. She lives in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.



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