

Luther Burbank
“The Plant Wizard”
(1849 – 1926)



At the height of his career, he was mobbed by fans like a rock star and his garden was a tourist attraction that drew crowds by the hundreds to the sleepy little town of Santa Rosa, California, circa early 20th century. During his life, he was labeled “the plant wizard” by the masses, written off as an amateur by academics and even despised by angry consumers. But the undeniable fact is that after developing over 800 varieties of plants during his 55 year career, Luther Burbank’s impact on the development of plant varieties and the food grown worldwide remains substantial nearly one hundred years after his death.

One of Burbank’s earliest vegetable developments was the Russet Burbank (Idaho) Potato, the most widely grown potato in the United States today. He sold the rights to the potato for \$150, using the money to fund a trip to Santa Rosa where he bought a 4 acre plot of land and began his crossbreeding experiments in earnest, revolutionizing California agriculture and firmly establishing it as the world’s salad bowl.

Working diligently over the next several years at his experimental garden in Sebastopol, Luther Burbank developed hundreds of plant, fruit and vegetable varieties that are household names today. The most famous of which are the Santa Rosa plum, Freestone peach, Shasta daisy, spineless cactus, and the white blackberry.

In pursuit of the perfect Walnut tree, one that would “probably produce more nuts than any other tree hitherto known,” as he put it, Burbank developed several hybrids. One of the most successful of these varieties is the Paradox Walnut tree, which is still used as rootstock in Walnut cultivation today. He created the Paradox (*Juglans* x ‘Paradox’) by crossing English Walnut trees (*Juglans regia*) with the California black Walnut (*Juglans hindsii*). The resulting hybrid demonstrated robust growth, reaching heights of sixty feet and trunk diameters of two feet in just sixteen years. While the Paradox trees did not produce consistent quality or quantity of nuts, the strong rootstock was perfectly suited

for northern California's soil and climate and optimized English Walnut tree production when grafted on them.

In 1893 Luther Burbank released a catalog titled, *New Creations in Fruits and Flowers*, filled with his most successful creations, including the Paradox Walnut tree. The catalog was an instant success and brought Burbank fortune and international recognition to go with his American fame. Being dubbed the "plant wizard" of the world brought out profiteers looking to cash in on the Burbank name and in the early 1900's his notoriety was turning sour due to bad business partnerships and academic skeptics.

Luther Burbank died on April 11, 1926, leaving behind a wealthy estate to his wife Elizabeth Waters Burbank, who turned over their home and gardens to the city of Santa Rosa when she passed in 1977. After his death, the true impact and importance of what he did in his life was realized by horticulturists, farmers, the general public and even the U.S. Congress.

In 1930, Congress passed the Plant Patent Law –a vote that swung on a letter Luther Burbank had written and was presented by Thomas Edison– and sixteen patents were awarded to Burbank posthumously. California celebrates Arbor Day on March 7 to honor the man who changed the face of agriculture one plant at a time.

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