

## Wade Batson

COLUMBIA, S.C.

**T**alk to Wade Batson and he'll be completely honest with you — he's not really a gardener. But his influence on the gardening and plant world is great and over the years he has inspired many people to pursue careers in botany, horticulture and garden preservation.

Batson was probably one of the most influential botany professors at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, S.C., but by his humble accounts he didn't do anything heroic. He was just a man who loved his job. And his journey to that job was one that didn't follow a straight path by any means.

"When I was a youngster I had a desire to learn all I could about animals," Batson said. "Then I began to realize that these animals were all dependent on plants, either directly or indirectly. So I decided I better take a look at plants, and my mother said, 'You won't have to look far.' The more I looked at plants, the more I liked them."

As an undergraduate at Furman University, Batson ended up taking some classes with a professor who was an avid botanist.

"I was excited to find someone with the same interests I had," Batson said.

After graduating he went to Harvard University to study but was told there weren't any jobs in the field, and if he had job prospects at home to go take them.

Batson taught high school and became a principal, but after seeing his students go off to fight in WWII he decided he better volunteer with them. He served on a tanker in the North Atlantic, and it was during the long cold days on duty that he started dreaming of a botany career again.

When the war was over he went

straight to Duke University where he got his master's and doctoral degrees. He then took a job as a professor at the USC in 1952, where he taught and researched until his retirement in 1982.

During his time teaching and researching at USC Batson influenced many people, from students to the people in the community. One of his students, John Nelson, is now a USC professor, and credits Batson for inspiring him to take this career route.

"When I took his class in 1972 it had already established a huge reputation as the most interesting class on campus for anyone who's interested in natural history," Nelson said. "That particular class cinched it for me that I was going to be a botanist, and I'm not the only person that the class was a bellweather for. It was marvelous, and wild and crazy, nothing like anything else students had as an offering."

Batson infused his lectures with enthusiasm, but was probably best known for his field trips for students and often some tagalong visitors from the community.

"His field trips were a philosophy in and of themselves," Nelson said. "We went to places probably only hunters had been before, like Congaree National Park before it was designated a national park. It was a real eye-opener for us."

Batson's academic interest lies in finding plants and figuring out what they are, but also studying the entire habitat, just like he did as a child. "He has an appreciation for natural landscapes and their preservation," Nelson said.

"He was concerned about the loss of habitat in our state and natural diversity before it became commonplace."



Wade Batson during his teaching years.

That passion led Batson to work with the Heritage Trust, an organization in South Carolina that helped protect natural areas in the state.

He also garnered the reputation over the years as the person to call to learn about natural things, especially plants. He's written books to help people learn about plants and their environment, including *Wildflowers of South Carolina* and *Landscape Plants for the Southeast*, both published by USC Press.

Batson's influence over the years has reached many people and today his legacy lives on. His students are teaching other students with the same passion and enthusiasm for plants and their environment. His books are valued resources for natural history lovers and gardeners across the region.

And his name lives on in an endowment set up at USC's AC Moore Herbarium that gives funds to help students continue research in the field of botany.

"You've got to have enthusiasm if you want to spread it," Batson said. It's obvious that he's spread his love for the plant world to many people, and his enthusiasm is still strong at 96 years old. **cg**

### Who's Your Favorite Gardener?

**IF YOU HAVE** a family member, friend or neighbor whose gardening has added to the life of your community, please contact *Carolina Gardener* at [editor@carolinagardener.com](mailto:editor@carolinagardener.com) or write to the editor at *Carolina Gardener Magazine*, P.O. Box 4504, Greensboro, NC 27404.