The Herb Lady

Christine Askew (l.), holding dill, with Laura, holding blue salvia
Introduction

On a rainy afternoon in mid-February, Dr. Roy Armstrong, Laura Belch, and Ann Stoltz, Life on the Pamlico staff members, traveled to Plymouth to talk with Mrs. Christine Askew, who owns and operates Askew's Nursery, located five miles outside Plymouth on Highway 32.

We arrived and waited in the gift shop. The shop was redolent of fascinating plants and crafts. There were arrangements of dried plants of various kinds, homemade wooden toys, and candles. We were anxious to ask Mrs. Askew about the things in her shop.

After a short period of time, Mrs. Askew arrived and warmly greeted us. As always, she was friendly and informative. We were enthralled with her knowledge of herbs and other ornamentals.

The purpose of our visit was to learn the value and function of herbs in our society.

Life: Please tell us something about your operation here, about how you got started.

Mrs. Askew: [Laughing] I think I just grew into it.

Life: Have you worked with herbs and other plants for a long time?

Mrs. Askew: On a real small scale for maybe a good while, but [on a large scale] only been about eight or nine years.

Life: You grow different flowers and that sort of thing. Is that the main part of what you do?

Mrs. Askew: Well, I concentrate on herbs and all types of herbs, whether they are ornamental, decorative, or medicinal, or just for the pleasure of growing them.

Life: Are there three different kinds of herbs?

Mrs. Askew: Well, you have the definition of a herb—whether it is useful any way shape or form. And when you want to get down to the definition of a herb, it pretty near takes care of just about everything that is growing. The traditional herbs that we think of are if they are useful in cooking or if they are useful in medicine or if they are useful ornamentally or if they are useful for dyeing. And dyeing in years back was one of the primary uses of the herbs. Either medicinal or dyeing was one of the two that they concentrated on. Ornamental they didn't pay much attention to them.

Life: What are some of the main medicinal ones? What are they used for?
Mrs. Askew: Medicinally people in this day and time don't really concentrate on them on a small scale. They are grown on a large scale by any number of pharmaceutical companies for use. And they are used in the makings of cosmetics and medicines quite extensively in this way, but as far as the small grower or the person that is growing them just in a small garden, they would probably only use them for making cough syrup or such as the aloe vera, which is a little bit of a controversy whether that's truly the name of the aloe is aloe vera. It's being promoted in that way. Some herbal people say that there is another name for it.

Life: You grow those?

Mrs. Askew: Oh, yes, the burn plant, [the name] which people know it by mainly.

Life: The burn plant?

Mrs. Askew: Yes, the burn plant. And that is grown commercially quite extensively for use in the cosmetics and medicines too.

Life: What are some of the others that you grow medicinally? Or any that you grow for whatever purpose?

Mrs. Askew: You have horeshound, comfrey, the aloe, which is a house plant rather than an outside plant.

Life: How about digitalis?

Mrs. Askew: The digitalis is not grown by small growers. It's grown on a commercial scale or the medicine they use for heart medicine. But on a small scale it is mainly used ornamentally because it has a very pretty flower in it. Probably rue. I can't think right this minute.

Life: You've told us about some of the herbs used for medical purposes. What about some of the herbs used for dyeing?

Mrs. Askew: There are any number of dye plants. Your safflower is a dye plant, matter is a dye plant, calendula or pot marigold is a dye plant. Cardinal flower is a dye plant. Indigo was grown back at the turn of the century. Indigo was grown in South Carolina very extensively commercially.

Life: I believe they grew that down in Georgia along the coast.

Mrs. Askew: South Carolina and Georgia both, I think, probably were in the use of that commercially along about the turn of the century.

Life: They also grew rice down there in Georgia.

Mrs. Askew: Yes, rice was being experimented with in that area. They had great plans for it. Indigo
was a very solid blue dye.

Life: Do you grow that?

Mrs. Askew: I have some indigo, yes. Indigo is very pretty as far as just looking at it. It has a beautiful flower in it.

Life: What kind of process would they have to go through to get it to use as a dye?

Mrs. Askew: Indigo would have been processed and crushed and left to ferment, and I think it was a process of probably fermenting for six to nine months, I believe.

Life: Is that right? Do they just put it in water, or what?

Mrs. Askew: It was put in water, but it was also stabilized with a fixative of some type that would cause it to ferment and not sour, in the same manner that you would make wine. It was some of the same process they went through, and then it was heated to a certain temperature and processed rather complexly.

Life: Would you say that indigo is an attractive flower?

Mrs. Askew: Very pretty flower. Looks a little bit like sweetpea, snapdragon.

Life: What are these right here?

Mrs. Askew: That's globe amaranth.

This is one of the everlasting or the strawflowers. It shrinks just a shade when it dries.

Life: It just dries out and stays like that?

Mrs. Askew: You wire it before it dries because once it dries, it is really difficult to get the wire into it. And the stems are not very substantial at all in holding, so you have to wire them while they are green because it is very difficult to get the wire in them once they dry. This is one of the everlasting, a strawflower [a flower that retains its color when dried], and this is a dill. Now, this is a herb. One of the artemisia. This is camphor artemisia. These were used medicinally.

Life: Do you process any of these into a medicinal form?

Mrs. Askew: No.

Life: You just grow it mainly for its decorative uses?

Mrs. Askew: We use the burn plant. I use some horehound now and then. I make a horehound cough syrup. It's a little bitter, but it's very effective.

Life: What about the chamomile?

Mrs. Askew: Chamomile is very good; that's a tea, though I guess it's
considered medicinal.

Life: Because it will put you to sleep?

Mrs. Askew: Yes.

Life: That's what Peter Rabbit's mother gave him. Isn't that what you told me [Laura]?

Mrs. Askew: Right. Peter Rabbit's mother gave him a cup of chamomile tea to calm him down after he got into Mr. McGregor's garden.

Life: Do you make that?

Mrs. Askew: Chamomile tea is very nice, yes.

Life: You've got two kids you could use that on! Calm them down a bit!

Life: How does it taste different from regular tea?

Mrs. Askew: Chamomile tea? Well, it's very mild.

Life: It's not a strong tasting tea?

Mrs. Askew: No, it's not strong-flavored at all, but it has a little bit of a sweet taste to it. You sweeten it with a little bit of honey or sugar.

Life: Kind of mellow tasting?

Life: Yes. Very smooth. It sorta makes you relax. It calms your nerves.

Life: What are the main ornamental or decorative herbs?

Mrs. Askew: There are so many of them I don't know where to start. Ornamentally probably one of the most popular ones is the blue salvia. I really use a lot of this. Probably there are so many of them that can be used decoratively and also in medicines. In fact, I think they are all attractive; I don't find any of the herb plants that aren't attractive. As a general rule they would certainly be an addition to anybody's garden, just to look at them and to sniff and smell them.

Life: It's a lot cheaper doing that than going to the grocery store and stocking your herb cabinet.

Mrs. Askew: Oh, true! There are a few that you can eliminate if you grow them, but some things you would not. You would not grow the spices in our area.

Life: But as far as sage and things like that?

Mrs. Askew: Sure, I don't ever buy sage anymore. I have lots of sage.

Life: I notice you've got some tobacco up there. Is that just to
how its wrapped?

Mrs. Askew: Tobacco is a little bit for show. Tobacco is an herb. It's a true herb, and it was used by the Indians as a herb.

Life: Is that right?

Mrs. Askew: And if people nowadays still used it in the same way, there would, of course, not be very many tobacco farmers.

Life: How was it used differently?

Mrs. Askew: Tobacco was used to settle the nerves, to calm you. It was also used for any number of other little things that they considered wrong with you. To expel worms [laughing]! It was used as an ointment to put on insect stings.

Life: In fact, when I was a boy, I had a bee sting, and I had someone take a cigarette immediately and break it up and spit on it and put it right on the sting.

Mrs. Askew: Sure.

Life: I think that that works.

Mrs. Askew: Oh, yes, definitely! The nicotine in it has some effect on, maybe numbing the area some, I suppose. I don't know how it works exactly.

Life: I wonder . . . A friend of
Globe amaranth, strawflowers

Variety of herbs and dried grasses
mine and I have been smoking a pipe for several years, and another friend of mine just took it up about a year ago, and he says it relaxes him. He quit smoking cigarettes, and he asked the doctor about it. And the doctor said that smoking a pipe is really good for you because it kind of relaxes you, but he recommended not inhaling it much. I inhale just enough to stay hooked, I guess, but not much. I guess maybe the Indians looked at it more like that.

Mrs. Askew: The Indians used it as a symbol of peace. When they smoked it, tobacco was in the peace pipe, and it was considered a symbol of peace between a group of people when they sat down to talk together, to iron out their problems and their whatever.

Life: You would say the way it's used today by millions of people, I guess, it's abusive now, isn't it?

Mrs. Askew: Naturally. We abuse just about everything that we get into!

Life: How long have you had this operation? You say about eight years? You're really into it pretty strong.

Mrs. Askew: Probably for about the last five or six years I've been kind of enlarging a little bit gradually. I sorta go with the demand.
Life: Then you have people just come in and buy the various herbs?

Mrs. Askew: Mainly, yes.

Life: Do you do much wholesaling?

Mrs. Askew: A small amount, not a lot.

Life: Who are your customers, mainly? Are they local people or are they tourists or both?

Mrs. Askew: A variety, yes, some of both.

Life: How did you learn how to grow these herbs?

Mrs. Askew: Well, if you have lived on a farm all your life and worked on the other things, you just sort of retain [the knowledge].

Life: Do you treat the herbs differently as you grow them, or are they all the same?

Mrs. Askew: Your herbs are mainly treated like your garden plants are. To a main degree, they are just like garden plants, and very few of them you have to treat any different from anything you grow in your garden. You can make them probably grow a little bit too lush for some things by over fertilizing. But I found that mainly the way you treat your garden with your other vegetables and flowers, they do fine.

Life: So you have them pretty well organized, or do you just grow different things together?

Mrs. Askew: I try to have little rows of each one. I try to label. As we start out in the spring, we will label.

Life: Do you use seeds every year?

Mrs. Askew: I think probably two thirds of the herbs I grow are perennials. They will come back.

Life: I notice you have wreaths. Do you do those?

Mrs. Askew: Yes.

Life: That is a real skill, there.

Mrs. Askew: Well, I don't know, maybe so. I got started doing the wreaths sorta by accident. One of my kinfolks—I don't know if you know Geraldine Waters or not, out at Acre Station. David Waters, her husband, is a fairly big logger. I was growing herbs and drying them, just because I was enjoying doing it, and hanging them up. And she came in, and she kept after me about fixing a wreath, and I had never fixed one before in my life.

Life: What are these little things here?

Mrs. Askew: That's the little wooden picks that I use. The herbs get rather fragile, and some of the
picks florists normally use, metal picks, don't really work that good. When they went in with a machine, they would fracture or break it. So I use the wooden picks.

Life: In addition to the lovely herbs and wreaths, we noticed a notched wooden stick, about eight inches long, with a short stick mounted on a nail at the end. What do you call that?

Mrs. Askew: He [Mr. Armstrong] knows.

Life: He lives in Bath.

Mrs. Askew: You don't know what that is?

Life: No.

Mrs. Askew: That's a mountain toy. You sure you don't know?

Life: No. I am a city boy.

Mrs. Askew: It's a whimmiedittle. Do you know how it works, Laura?

Life: Yes.

Life: After a couple of failures, Laura succeeded in working the whimmiedittle by rubbing a smooth stick across the notches. The short stick at the end spun rapidly.

Mrs. Askew: There is a lot of reading on those [whimmiedittles]. Well, some people call it the geehaw
Whimmedittle or geehaw toy

toy. And if you want it to go [spin] to the right, you tell it to go "gee"; if you want it to go [spin] left, you tell it to "haw." You need the little short stick over there. You let your thumbnail run up the side of it. On the top side it will go to the left, I think. And, then, if you run your thumb nail under the bottom of it, it will go up and down.

Life: What is the purpose of it?

Mrs. Askew: It's just a little toy. A lot of them were made in the mountains and still are.
Life: Tell me the names one more time.

Mrs. Askew: A whimmiedittle or a geehaw.

Life: What kind of wood are they made of?

Mrs. Askew: Any type of willow wood works nice, because it has a little hollow center. When it dries, there is a little soft center in willow. You have the little nail in the end of it. And the little nail slides real easy.

Life: Do you make those?

Mrs. Askew: Well, yes, I make them. I worked with a group of 4-H'ers, and this was one of our projects. Everyone got a chance to make one.

Life: We found that another of Mrs. Askew's skills is making soap. How do you make soap?

Mrs. Askew: Well, you either use hog lard or beef tallow. A mixture of beef tallow and hog lard makes a very good soap, and it doesn't get strong. And [it's] a very solid soap. A bar of that type of soap will probably last three or four times as long as commercially prepared soap.

Life: How long does it usually boil?

Mrs. Askew: You don't really boil it. I think that's a misconception that people have of making soap because lye gets hot on its own. It doesn't have to have fire under it. Your fat has to be liquid enough to pour, and so you would heat that. That's the only reason for a fire is to get the fat where it will pour. But you put your lye in your water, and it will soon come to a temperature.

Life: She grows sesame too. There is an Indian in town that comes out, and we [Laura and Mrs. Askew] beat the seeds out of the sesame and they use it in baking bread.

Life: After talking with Mrs. Askew about her herbs and crafts, we asked about her family background. We found that her roots run back to Bath. How long have you lived here in Plymouth, all your life?

Mrs. Askew: Every since I've been married. [Laughing] All my life!

Life: You're not from here originally?

Mrs. Askew: Well, I'm partly from Bath, too, combination of Pinetown and Bath.

Life: Were you raised in Bath?

Mrs. Askew: I lived around Bath. My father was from Bath. My grandfather was from Bath. Cutlers, Bowens.
Life: I [Armstrong] know a lot of Cutlers.

Mrs. Askew: I was a Cutler. Had quite a few folks out that way [Bath].

Life: Do they live in Bath or around Bath?

Mrs. Askew: Some in Bath, some in White Post, all the surrounding areas.

Life: I [Armstrong] know where White Post is. My son was telling me, I was taking him home from Scouts, he says, "This is White Post." I said, "How do you know?" He said, "That sign right there says 'White Post.'" It's on the highway. It just says "White Post."

Mrs. Askew: I lived out there right many years.

Life: That is right outside of Bath.

Mrs. Askew: Yes, just before you get into Bath, three miles, I believe.

Life: That's right. There's a big church there.

Mrs. Askew: Athens Chapel Church.

Life: We talked about Bath some--about the outdoor drama in Bath.

Mrs. Askew: Every little historical place is getting their own drama now.

Life: Wonder what we [Laura] will do in Mackey's?

Mrs. Askew: Well, there's quite a lot of history there too. Mackey's ferry is in a lot of the history.

Life: Laura, who lives at Mackey's, pointed out that its population is about 50 and that Mackey's is right on the Albemarle Sound, just a little ways from here.

Mrs. Askew: If you go back to the Civil War and read the Civil War history from the area, you will find quite a bit in there about Mackey's ferry.

Life: You are on the Albemarle Sound! When you think of Albemarle, you think of it as being way north of here. But Laura pointed out that we were about ten miles from the Sound.

Life: We discussed the differences in the size of Bath Creek and Mackey's Creek and decided that Bath Creek is a little wider and longer.

Mrs. Askew: I think probably Bath is getting quite a number of people in just because they like the climate, and they like the atmosphere.

Life: Well, they got all those sailboats in there, and some of
those people are coming in.

Mrs. Askew: It's a small town and historical.

Life: It's a small town. I'll tell you that.

Mrs. Askew: Well, I can remember I went to high school at Bath. In fact, during World War II they had a little tower spot or building. And they had a little tower up above it. You could climb up it if you wanted to. I didn't climb up it myself. But we had to have two people that manned this little building at all times. So a lot of the high school kids, some of them that their grades weren't too weak, got two of us and would go up. We had an hour each time and you didn't leave until two others came. We had to watch the sky and make sure there wasn't any foreign planes coming by and make a report. I didn't see anything that didn't look like it wasn't an American plane.

Life: Do you remember going to the movies there in Bath?

Mrs. Askew: I never went to the movies in Bath. I didn't live close enough to Bath to have an opportunity to go to the movies. And in that day and time, if you weren't on the school bus going to school, you didn't get out in the country. There was a country store that came to you and the mule and cart went to the store and a few people had cars but not really very many. And if you didn't have one before the war started, you didn't get one after the war started.

Life: The store coming to you, what did you mean?

Mrs. Askew: It was just a little country store on wheels.

Life: Oh, really!

Mrs. Askew: It was little. In fact, there was two businessmen in the Bath area that had these country stores, and they would come and buy the eggs and whatever people had to sell. You traded out with groceries, and you could get a lot of staples on the truck and you didn't even have to go to the grocery store.

Life: That's something. I didn't know that. We have talked to several people much older than you who live in Bath, and they were talking about how schools changed and how that school bus was really an adventure to go to school on.

Mrs. Askew: It was. I mean you looked forward to school. You had been home during the whole summer, and you had been working all summer long, and you were glad to see your friends again. You hadn't seen them in three months!

Life: We sure have enjoyed talking
to you. It's really been very enlightening and interesting. We always get into something unplanned like Bath and the war. Things like that.

Mrs. Askew: Well, it's casual conversation.

Life: That's what I like about it, though, you know. You come out to talk about one thing, and there is always something else that comes up!

Mrs. Askew, with ambrosia geranium; Ann, with celosia
Conclusion

The time Mrs. Askew spent showing and telling us about how much she enjoys growing herbs for their medicinal and ornamental values was very rewarding. Her love of the business showed strongly in her beaming face during our entire conversation. It's nice to know that there are still people who are willing to take time out of their busy schedules to share their knowledge of the value of herbs in our society today. Upon leaving, we thanked her for her time and generosity and our knowledge gained.