

HSA Living Treasures—Madalene Hill

By Gwen Barclay

Eldest of 13 children, Madalene was reared in Kansas. Introduced to herbs by first-generation German and Dutch settlers to whom herbs were a way of life, she built upon that childhood interest to become one of the most knowledgeable persons in the United States and one of the true pioneers in the business of herbs in this country.

Madalene returned to Texas to rear her two children, and in 1951 she remarried. She and her husband, Jim Hill, shared a love of gardening. They began the retirement project that was to become Hilltop Herb Farm in Cleveland, Texas, located north of Houston. This was originally intended to be a hobby. While operating a thriving egg business and experimenting with growing gladiolus for the fresh flower market, Madalene expanded her collection of herbs. She ordered plants and seeds from the few nurseries that would ship plants at the optimum time for the South. Gardens were established and the variety of herbs grown in that remote area of east Texas was astounding. As the volume of plant material grew, so did the need to do something with the harvest. Ever-frugal, Madalene was soon making herbal tea and seasoning blends, salts, pickled vegetables, potpourri and sachets. These were given away, as were the small pots of herbal seedlings and cuttings, but one day someone insisted on paying, and the business was born.

The farm grew at a pace that amazed Madalene and Jim, especially after 1967 when Madalene began to serve meals. These delicious meals brought great fame to Hilltop with stories appearing around the world. This, along with the vast array of herbs, made Hilltop ahead of its time in many ways. There was no long-range plant because Madalene was always sure at the end of each of the first few years that "that would be it."

During extensive travels, Madalene collected herbs never seen in North America. Friends and guests brought interesting plants, which she began propagating and selling. From the beginning, Madalene shared new treasures generously with commercial growers and home gardeners to introduce them to the public. A number of herbs now common in the trade are credited to Madalene.

Madalene has helped spread the use and delight of herbs since the late 1950s through lectures. The educational portion of the business at Hilltop was extremely important to her, and she instituted hands-on workshops long before that was the norm. Her free-lance writing career started with "From My Side of the Hill", a "line-a-day" page for egg customers, which evolved into a weekly column on cooking for a local newspaper and numerous booklets about herb cultivation and usage. Madalene's articles have appeared in HSA's journal, *The Herbarist*, and she served as Editor in 1978-79. With her daughter Gwen, Madalene co-authored *Southern Herb Growing*. They continue to write regularly for a number of magazines.

After Jim's death, Madalene sold Hilltop Herb Farm. She concentrated on lectures, writing and consulting for several years. She helped develop a commercial herb production project for the Center for the Retarded's Rural Community in Sealy, Texas, and assisted the start-up and expansion of several herb nurseries and shops. She relocated in 1993 to the International Festival Institute near Round Top, Texas, where Gwen is Director of Food Service. Madalene has developed a series of wonderful gardens, which are attracting hundreds of visitors. She also serves as a volunteer Curator of the McAshan Gardens.

The Festival Hill collection of herbs is rapidly growing as Madalene searches out plants that were lost in the aftermath of the tornado that destroyed Hilltop Herb Farm in 1983. The testing of various genera for both summer and winter hardiness in the South is her latest project. Madalene continues to stress the importance of high standards in plant cultivation and encourages new growers to become familiar with, and use proper botanical names.

Madalene became a member at large of The Herb Society of America in 1958 and organized the South Texas Unit in 1968. She has served as chairman, director, secretary and treasurer of that unit, in addition to numerous committee chairmanships. When the Pioneer Unit was formed, Madalene became a charter member. She was awarded the Helen de Conway Little Medal of Honor in 1978. Madalene Hill served as national president of HSA from 1986-88, and was instrumental in bringing the organization to its new home in Ohio. She has continued to be very active on the national level, serving on the President's Advisory Committee. She initiated the Library Feasibility Sub-Committee to study various facets of The Society's library and archives. The Rosemary Circle was her brainchild, devised to honor members who have been active for over 25 years. Madalene has been a driving force of The Society, paving the way for it to be a dominant force in herbal knowledge in the twenty-first century.

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