

Glorious white dianthus makes debut

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

WHEN FLOWERS bloom across America this spring and summer, countless gardeners will thrill for the first time ever to the pure white blossoms of the "Sophia."

The blossom is a new variety of dianthus, remarkable for both its pure color and because somebody took the time and patience to develop it. That somebody happens to be a little lady from Livonia, Sophia Zombory, 85, the person for whom the flower has been named.

She did not work alone in her efforts to develop the variety. Her lifelong work, hybridizing countless new varieties of flowers, is something she shared with her husband, William, until his death in the early 1980s.

It is an effort she continues to share today with her son, Bill, who is carrying on the work of his parents.

According to Bill Fike, chief horticulturist for Jackson and Perkins Co., a major supplier of plants and seeds, and the firm that is marketing the "Sophia," the Zomborys were proudest of this particular flower because of its pristine white color. They originally called it the "White Diamond."

It was Fike who suggested it be renamed the "Sophia" in honor of the woman who helped to develop it.

THE DEVELOPMENT of the "Sophia" is a real contribution to the garden-

'The development of the 'Sophia' is a real contribution to the gardening community

— Katie Thorsheim
Jackson and Perkins Co.

ing community, according to Katie Thorsheim, promotion manager for Jackson and Perkins Co. "It is unusual for anyone to take the patience and time to attempt hybridizing dianthus (a close relative to the carnation) because hybridizing is painstaking enough to begin with. Dianthus is even more so because it tends to be resistant. Yet it is a very useful gardening plant, normally ignored by most hybridizers," Thorsheim says the company expects sales to reach 50,000.

She said the Zomborys are unique because most people who work at producing new varieties of flowers do so as a hobby. The Zomborys have made it a lifelong career, willing to devote the time required for success. "Few are as devoted," she adds.

By any measure, the Zombory success is substantial. During a 37-year relationship with Jackson and Perkins Co., they have produced what Thorsheim describes as "virtually thousands of varieties. Many have been true in color, meaning they are genetically a new variety."

Developing new varieties, many of



which have been distinguished as the only new variety in a season Jackson and Perkins Co. has marketed, is not the only Zombory accomplishment. Just mention the name Zombory among gardening circles in Livonia and neighboring environs and it is almost certain the name will be recognized.

THE ZOMBORYS have contributed substantially to their community as well. In Livonia alone, four hybridizations heightened beauty in flower beds at both the Civic Center and Greenmead, a historical park started in 1976.

The specimens include three multiblossoming species, including the self-descriptive Coral Satin, the McNamara (named after the mayor of the city) and the Livonia. Both the McNamara and the Livonia are bicolors of pink and yellow. Another contribution by the Zomborys is the Baron Von Deutsch, a white climber.

The gifts to the city were done in a manner that, based upon the comments of

those who know them, is reflective of the Zomborys, a couple described by admirers as very friendly and cheerful.

Jim Trenner, a foreman with the Livonia Department of Public Works, worked closely with the Zomborys from 1976 until the time of William's death.

"They just showed up one day with these beautiful flowers," Trenner recalls, describing the Zomborys first contribution of Coral Satin to Greenmead. He says they asked for nothing in return. Two dozen of these plants now grow in gardens at Greenmead and the Civic Center. It took the Zomborys 20 years to develop the variety.

Mary Pulick, a member of the Livonia Historical Commission who was chair of the garden restoration at Greenmead during the late 1970s, echoes similar recollections.

"I would receive a phone call from the Zomborys, asking me to meet them in an hour. I'd rush to the gardens and they would contribute more plantings."

The Zomborys were also very private people. Trenner visited often in their home, describing it as "an enjoyable place to spend an hour or two." But he says they carefully guarded their privacy.

This stemmed, Trenner believes, from years before when they gained a certain celebrity status following news articles about their work with the Ford gardens.

"People would just walk into the the Zombory yard uninvited and pick their flowers. They didn't like it. They never wanted publicity."

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