



Niels Ebbesen Hansen

Dakota Images

Niels Ebbesen Hansen, whose plant-breeding successes earned him the title "Burbank of the Plains," was born in Denmark on 4 January 1866 and came to the United States with his family at the age of seven. He graduated from Iowa State College at Ames in 1887 and began his career at commercial plant nurseries, but he longed for more experimental work with plants. Upon receiving his master's degree from Iowa State College in 1895, he became a professor of horticulture at South Dakota State College in Brookings and a staff member of the Agricultural Experiment Station there.

Hansen, a pioneer in the effort to adapt agriculture to the harsh environment of the Northern Great Plains, served as the first plant explorer for the United States Department of Agriculture. Believing that "we should obtain hardiness from plants that are hardy in the first place," he made several trips to the northern and interior reaches of Europe and Asia between 1897 and 1934, spending from three to ten months at a time searching for plants that would benefit agriculture in the colder and drier regions of North America. Perhaps his most important find was Cossack alfalfa, a natural drought- and cold-resistant hybrid from the steppes of Siberia. From one teaspoonful of this seed collected in 1906 came a hardy forage crop for the Northwest and a new source of income for western South Dakota, where alfalfa seed was grown for commercial distribution. Hansen was also responsible for introducing smooth brome grass and crested wheat grass, prized by farmers for their food value and tenacity. In all, he introduced more than three hundred new varieties of fruits, vegetables, trees, shrubs, flowers, grains, and forage crops to the northern plains and worked to breed hardiness and disease-resistance into common fruits, ornamental plants, and native trees and shrubs.

Hansen received a Doctor of Science degree from the University of South Dakota in 1917 and won numerous awards from institutions and horticultural societies across the United States and Canada. In 1937, he retired after forty-two years with South Dakota State University. He died 5 October 1950 in Brookings.

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