

## Beach Books – for gardeners

An odd idea, don't you think, taking a book to the beach? Hard to take your eyes off shifting sand and wheeling gulls long enough to concentrate on the workings of someone else's mind. Even in a tree house there is a scampering squirrel, or a purposeful march of ants as a distraction. Nature reading, surely that is a summertime thing, even a long term project.

A friend who comes alive in her beloved Smokey Mountains sent me "The Prophet of Dry Hill", subtitled "lessons from a life in nature" by David Gessner. Published by Beacon Press in 2005 the book is based on the author's encounter with native writer and Cape Cod resident John Hay. Dug into an off-season rental on Cape Cod the author sought out the 80-something Hay for interviews leading to an intended biography. That book did not happen, but the small endearing one that did, of their year of acquaintance ripening into friendship, is a treasure.

John Hay returned to Cape Cod after his service in World War II, built a house on a dry hill and became a nature writer, a departure from the government service of his distinguished ancestors. Living a life on a few acres gave him an opportunity to observe, close up, the changes to a once sparsely habited place as 'progress' happens and like those living in other newly crowded places, Cape Cod natives lose their footing in the natural world.

Not a beach book, nor a porch book but one for the garden shed or bench is "The Ortho Home Gardener's Problem Solver." This 1993 book is useful because it has great pictures of the insects, spots, wilts, and so forth creating the problems. The solutions are mostly chemical as the book is a product of the Monsanto Corporation.

Almost 30 pages of pictures and text are devoted to lawns and this is my favorite section because it has pictures of the weeds! A rose may be a rose but it truly bothers me that, if they are not sufficiently attractive to be labeled wildflowers, weeds get no respect. I do want to know what I am pulling out! Because the book is dated it does not reflect current thinking on ways to reduce lawns and substitute ground covers for them, but it has a fine outline of grass species and the care required for maintenance.

It covers such problems as moles, dead patches, fusarium blight, webworms, grubs, compaction, drought: may make you consider indoor-outdoor carpeting? In the discussion of the weed, *Taraxacum officinale*, dandelion, it suggests treating the entire lawn with propionic acid or, for spots, an herbicide containing 2,4-D and mecoprop. It advises against hand-pulling.

Since people are actually growing dandelions as a crop for fancy restaurants why not eat them? Dig them before they bloom as they become bitter with age, like old gardeners. Purslane is another weed that is becoming a fashion in salads. It and another weed, lamb's quarters (*Portulaca oleracea* and *Chenopodium album*) are amazingly healthful. Purslane has omega-3 acids and vitamin E. Lamb's quarters provides nutrient-rich salads or cooked greens and the seeds in its small pods have more protein than wheat.

Even that imported tyrant, Kudzu, can be eaten as it is rich in antioxidants, both leaves and roots. A caution: consult something like Euell Gibbons "Stalking the wild asparagus" before serving weeds with your Sunday roast. Pokeweed for example can be delicious early spring and toxic with age: even when young it is advisable to boil, pour off the water, reboil. There is lot to be said for those ubiquitous frozen peas.

### **Pollution is expensive:**

After reading about the moans and groans that cleaning up Chesapeake Bay will be "costly" to business and developers, it was good to read the words of former Delegate and former Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources, W. Tayloe Murphy, jr.. He mentioned that the number of Bay watermen declined from 14,000 to 1500 between 1993 through 2009. Thousands of watermen have sold their boats and gear, no longer able to make a living.

The diseases and poor water quality have decimated Oyster production costing more than 4 billion dollars. Even the 'recovering' crab industry lost 4500 jobs between 1998 and 2006. Don't those moaners and groaners realized that spending money on the recovery of the Bay would be a tremendous boost to Virginia's economy, a real investment in the future of what we used to call 'The Commonwealth'.