

ET Not the Only Alien!

A cautionary note: If the catalog offers you a rare, never-seen-before plant, take a moment to consider. If it is native to some far distant corner of the planet, call your travel agent and schedule a visit to this exotic wonder. We must be more cautious about what we bring into our gardens. Exotic art on your walls is wonderful but that new unknown plant may turn into a gorilla weed, cover your universe and shoulder out the native plants. Those invasive that our country is spending billions to eradicate did not all come uninvited. Some were once new and in demand.

Every spring our gardens offer new experiences of the weeding kind, but it is the weeds that return year after year that try our patience. Long arching pinnate leaves of the trumpet vine drive me to distraction. This thing may be charming crawling up a telephone pole on the highway waving its orange trumpets, but in the azaleas it is a royal pain. It was here long before this area was a neighborhood and it is impossible to remove *Campis* without unearthing the shrubs and trees that it invades. A charming native indeed!

A foreign invader is easier to tackle, if just as fruitless. Japanese stilt grass is on all the lists and right now millions of quarter-inch seedlings are just asking for a hoe. However, if they are disturbed they will turn themselves right side up and regrow roots. They are easier to pull out later and it has to be done before the tiny flowers become seeds.

Another plant especially destructive of the Bay ecology is Japanese barberry. Although the barberry is on all the do-not-plant lists, *Berberis thunbergii* continues to be enthusiastically planted for its burgundy foliage. One thing that may discourage planting it, according to an article in "Bay Journal" is that research is showing that there is at least a five-fold increase in the risk of Lyme disease in areas where this is the dominant plant. No reason was given for the prevalence of seed ticks where barberry flourished so does not the connection seem tenuous?

I was surprised to read the invasive mile-a-minute, *Persicaria perfolia*, was not native because it seems to have been here always. Its other name, devil's tearthumb, may ring a bell if you have tried to pull out the vine and had your glove punctured by that curved barb under the triangular leaf. The good news is that a weevil has been imported from its native home that eats this plant and nothing else. When the plant is totally eaten, the plan is that the weevil will conveniently die of starvation. We hope it works, that the weevil does not evolve to dine on Virginia creeper.

Another thing I keep pulling out is seedling mimosa or silktree, *Albizia julibrissin*. This pretty thing grows incredibly fast and dies young, but it is absurdly fecund. This small tree seems to be over your head as if by magic and while the feathery pink flowers brighten the landscape every one of those following brown seed pods will provide seedlings for generations.

When gardeners need a pretty small tree, they are so easy to find in Virginia, starting with shadbush, fringetree, dogwood, crepe myrtle, redbud and ending where ever your fancy takes you.

GOOD NEWS: There is a win against scum: when it rains in Florida, beaches, lakes, and streams have been endangered by foul slimy algae blooms. That translated into poor water quality, even shutting down drinking water plants. Now this pollution is illegal: nitrogen and phosphorus overflow is to be regulated. Actually in other parts of the world, algae are being used to create a biofuel. Never underestimate man's ability to solve his problems!

U.S. researchers have made progress in converting plant sugars directly into biodiesel by modifying E. coli bacterium. This has been done with Brazilian sugar cane. The value of the process lies in avoiding more complicated and more expensive processes requiring other chemicals. The biodiesel fuel that is a result of this new process is said to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 85 percent compared with conventional diesel. The expectation is that the process will also work with crop waste and grasses.

TIME IS RUNNING OUT! Register for the September 7 – November 18 Master Gardener Training course to be held Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9 – 12, at Northside Christian Church, 1213 George Washington Hwy, York County. Application deadline is May 28, 2010. It may be downloaded at:<http://www.yorkcounty.gov.vce>