

Fall is for Raking Files

Leaves are not the only things that accumulate! A dark and chill-to-the-bone day will remind you how pleasant it is to settle in a warm spot and clean out files and folders. I read with scissors and have yellowing newspaper articles, notes about books, items from gardening friends. Periodically I sort and toss but there are always things to keep because they may ring a note of cheer...or sound the clang of alarm like the following quotation.

“More than logging, more than slash-burn farming, the global rush to grow ever more soy in the Amazon and palm oil in Southeast Asia is wrecking rain forests.”- *Fred Pearce*

Palm oil is in soap and soup, toothpaste and coffee creamer. The oil palm tree doesn't produce large nuts like the coconut palm but huge bunches plum sized fruits. Large plantations in Malaysia and Indonesia produce the bulk of the oil and unfortunately forest have been cleared for the palm trees. If the world turns to palm oil as a biofuel to mix with regular fuel oil, the result will be botanical deserts where we once had diverse ecosystems.

Palm oil is used lavishly in food and cosmetics because it is cheap and easily converted to those uses. HRH the Prince of Wales is an avid gardener and environmentalist. (we may dismiss his opinions because he is without a proper day job but we must acknowledge that Prince Charles could have joined the jet set like his great uncle Edward)

One of his principal concerns is the loss of the world's rain forests, those important climate regulators. Prince Charles initiated 'Rainforests Project' in 2007 as an effort to cut deforestation. He reminds us that nature is the capital that underpins capitalism. Case in point: rainforests have more than half our world's biodiversity, they generate rainfall and they secure vast quantities of carbon. The statistics show that rainforests are being lost at the rate of six million hectares a year, contributing 20% of the harmful greenhouse gas emissions.

The quotation above came from Fred Pearce, the author of a book from the Gloucester Library, "Confessions of an Eco-sinner: tracking down the sources of my stuff". Journalist, this middle-aged husband and father begins his journey three miles below the surface of the earth in the Driefontein mine, part of the Witwatersrand gold field 30 miles from Johannesburg, S.A. Pearce was checking out the gold in his wedding ring. Gold is extracted from rock, five grams of gold for every ton of rock brought to the surface.

From wedding ring to morning coffee and the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro to air miles, computers, and beer, the author meets the hundreds of people supporting his ordinary London life. The book may have a serious intent, knowledge, but reading it is great fun, linking all of us on every continent to one another in understanding our 'stuff'.

With half as much stuff we would have a lot less dusting to do. You know the drill: we get tired of taking care of those treasures, pack them away, forget we even own them, and buy more? How odd?

There are a lot of new things going on that never seem to make 'news' status. For example, professors and students at Western Washington University's Vehicle Research Institute have built a hybrid car that gets @ 94 mpg using fuel derived from cow manure. Holy cow!

A University of Mass./Amherst experiment uses bacteria from Potomac River silt to create biofuels with energy comparable to that of gasoline. MIT labs are working on batteries that pack more power into smaller units and at the U of Maryland there is a plan to substitute the power in circuitries from batteries with power from light, natural or artificial. All of this good news should convince us that looking forward is more promising than looking back to good old days that were never all that great anyway.

China is making money by manufacturing components for alternative energy systems. They produce 40% of the world's photovoltaic panels and 30% of the world's wind turbines. We can be glad that in 1995 only 55 nations had an energy policy and that this year 100 countries do.