

GINNY COOK

96

*Some
Notes
Toward
Plants*

DEVIL'S TOBACCO

Eastern Skunk Cabbage's name is practical and informative: it smells of skunk and nothing else. The foul odor attracts flies and beetles and other carrion feeders in marshes of Georgia (up to Nova Scotia) to facilitate pollination. Eastern Skunk Cabbage is also called Polecat Weed, Devil's Tobacco, and Meadow Cabbage.

The leaves contain crystals of calcium oxalate, which create a terrible prickling sensation on the tongue and throat. It is also used to cure sores and swelling of the skin.

In early spring, the plant begins to heat. It melts the snow around it, the water and air carrying its stench across the wetlands. The plant thrives in the late February cold when no other plant can, attracting insects and animals newly emerged from hibernation.

As it grows taller, its contractile roots pull the plant downwards underneath the soil, and it becomes impossible to uproot. No one knows how old it can become.

GALLON SODA, GAL-N'-SODA, GAL-N'-SOLDIER

The *Galinsoga Parviflora* daisy is small and invasive across the Southeast. The unfamiliar Latin name, *Galinsoga*, through a series of misunderstandings and mumblings, became something that made sense to Londoners of the late 1700s: Gallant Soldier. Among family members, Shaggy Soldiers and Hairy Soldiers, Gallant Soldiers have become one of the more persistent plants all over the world.

FOOT-A-NIGHT/MILE-A-MINUTE

Kudzu, the "vine that ate the South," was first introduced from Japan to Philadelphia in 1876. It has served a number of purposes besides being an aggressive nuisance. During World War II, U.S. troops brought the weed to the islands of Vanuatu to use as camouflage.

NINETY-SEVEN

The height of kudzu's reputation in the South occurred during the 1930s, with certain thanks to a regional agronomist in my hometown, Spartanburg, South Carolina. In 1939 R. Y. Baily, the "Father of Kudzu," wrote the first comprehensive booklet about it, successfully convincing farmers and others of the importance of kudzu in preventing soil erosion.

It spreads rapidly, sending runner roots across the landscape and covering the ground quickly. A number of decades after its introduction to the South—a perfect habitat for the plant—kudzu has taken over forests, farmlands, and even buildings. Its seeds grow in pods and may take several years to germinate, making the eradication of a kudzu forest (accomplished with weekly mowing and intensive cow grazing) extremely difficult and time-consuming.

Today kudzu is also used as a treatment for alcoholism, as jelly for toast, and as powder to thicken gravy.

GLOXINIA

Many years ago my grandfather August made a woodcut of a plant. I know nothing of the story behind the image, except that the black-and-white print he made from the woodcut is titled "Gloxenia"—the misspelled name of a fairly common houseplant. I have always loved this print. The stems of the long top-heavy flowers are entangled, and the shadowy rendering of the leaves creates a distortion of two- and three-dimensional space. My favorite part of the image is that the plant buzzes with a visual force field of zigzags that August carved around it. The lines run along the edges of the entire Gloxinia, emanating light and energy that make the plant seem radioactive.

FIRE-CLIMAX PINES

Their seeds are stored in cones. Their time of quiescence can be long, lasting many years, and will end only if a forest fire sweeps past. The heat

NINETY-EIGHT

triggers the cones to open after killing the parent trees, enabling the seeds to soak up nutrients from the ash.

The Longleaf Pine, which can live to be 400 years old, populates the Southeast. After early settlers began killing off forests for boatbuilding, turpentine, and rosin, foresters have attempted to save the pine since the early 1900s by preventing all fires in Longleaf Pine habitats. Without fire, the ground becomes covered in pine needles, preventing the seeds from reaching soil. Over the past century, 90 million acres of Longleafs have dwindled to less than two million.

On Guadalupe Island off the Baja peninsula of Mexico, seeds that fell from the burnt cones of Guadalupe Pines were eaten by thousands of feral goats, leaving behind only 120 trees.

BURSTING HEART/HEARTS-A-BUSTIN'

Its form is a lance, with scarlet skin rough and thick like a runner's calloused foot. It is nearly impossible to open with your hands. Every autumn this skin ruptures, and four red-orange berries shaped like hominy kernels fall down from their split pods. In stormy weather, the berries bump one another, bursting in heavy gusts.

Just before my mother died, I watched hurricane winds smack a ripe shrub against my grandmother's house, staining pink fireworks on the white wall. They dried dripping.

WORMWOOD FOREST/RED FOREST

The ring was six miles wide. The acrid cloud hovered for days, unloading radioactive dust all over the pines. Green quickly turned ginger-brown. All of the trees were bulldozed, heaved away to waste graveyards, dug hastily miles away. Some animals died too, each at its own speed. Others stopped reproducing.

NINETY-NINE

After the evacuation, different animals from other areas moved in, escaping human disturbance, finding quiet. (There are no biological sensors for radiation.) Endangered horses were unleashed in the area. An experiment. A chance.

Now birds fly in and out of the Reactor, nesting their eggs inside the “Sarcophagus” lid. All of these animals have flourished—the birds, the horses. A bear’s footprints, not seen in the area for centuries, have been spotted. All have prospered, except one. Just one. A mouse with cancer. It didn’t make it.

But I wanted to tell you about the plants and trees. Crazy mutations have happened—there are more plant species than ever. Only these plants are all bigger. Taller. Some greener.

Some trees are starting to grow back, but their branches do not reach towards the sun. They twist downwards, earthbound, burying themselves.

DAD’S DREAM

He eased into it, slipping out of consciousness with a faint twitch of his left cheek. He came along a path through the forest to the edge of a cliff. A warm fear spread through him, beginning at his knees.

He looked left and right. Rows and rows of trees surrounded him.

A man’s voice echoed from behind him: “You grew beautiful trees.” He could not turn around. “What kind of trees? Oak or pine?” The voice replied, “120 fruit trees and 120 fruit trees.”

The voice calmed him as he stood. He became fixed on the brightness of the ripe fruit.

ONE HUNDRED

DORMANCY/GERMINATION

Snagged on your knee sock.

Licked up by the dog, who found it later on the kitchen floor by the back door.

Shat out into the neighbor's yard (and not picked up in an inside-out grocery bag). Thrown into the green bin by the irate neighbor you want evicted.

Then a stillness.

A warmth borne out of three weeks of neglect on the neighbor's part to drag the bin out onto the curb.

It rains, and water seeps in through the cracks in the plastic, filling the bin.

When the bin is finally (casually) tossed on the curb on trash pick-up day, and its contents of co-mingling yard waste accidentally spilled onto the irate neighbor's garden, it can finally do what it is born to do:

It grows.

It spreads.

It occupies.

ONE HUNDRED ONE

Sources: Mary Mycio's *Wormwood Forest: A Natural History of Chernobyl* (2005), *Dictionary of American Regional English*, *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, R. Y. Bailey's *Kaulsky for Erosion Control in the Southeast* (1944), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture's PLANTS Database, and Sally Cook.