Haddam Garden Club
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History and The Beast

Some weeks ago I wrote of my front-yard battle with a thicket of forsythia, or as I call it, The Beast. I had stripped off every single branch and cut the main stems as far down as my loppers could manage--generally, the 1" diameter mark. Everything larger had to wait until I could borrow my brother's reciprocating saw. In the five weeks until that happened, every single stem resprouted, with three or four feet of new growth. I'm not exaggerating; the bittersweet vines entangled with it grew even longer. I attacked it again last week. There were a half dozen original shrubs, identifiable because they had the thickest stems. A few could be dug out, but most I just cut off below ground level. And then I grubbed out probably thirty progeny, with slightly thinner main stems and roots. I've tried to smother it all with a thick layer of cardboard (thank you to Hall's Power Equipment for the big cartons) and an even thicker layer of mulch. Now, fingers crossed to see who wins. Who's laying odds on The Beast?

As I worked I wondered how forsythia reached my little Connecticut town, along with so many other aliens. It's named for William Forsyth, a Scot who became the Head Royal Gardener and a founder of the Royal Horticultural Society. He didn't discover it in its native China, but he did send hordes of plant explorers fanning out across the globe to bring back species previously unknown to the West, with mixed results. The Age of Enlightenment valued the use of reason, scientific method, and what it imagined would be the resultant progress. A healthy dose of cautious humility might have been a useful fourth precept; along with many commercially important and/or beautiful plants came too many scourges. Explorers brought back coffee, tea, pomegranates and rubber; they also gave us bittersweet, barberry, Oriental wisteria, and of course forsythia.

Wealthy collectors subsidized ventures so they could be the first to show off new treasures. That's why California redwoods tower in English estates, and the newest, lushest roses in Europe were grown in the gardens of Napoleon's Empress Josephine. Her treasured specimens descended from roses discovered in central Asia, brought back to Europe by Crusaders, then crossed with some North American varieties, like the Pasture Rose, *Rosa Carolina*. In the plant world, globalization is nothing new.

The military joined in the hunt, too. The British Navy, most powerful in the world at the time, listened with great interest to reports of a very tall, very straight pine

discovered during Captain Cook's second voyage to the South Pacific. To the navy's disappointment, the Norfolk Island pines (not a true pine, by the way) proved to be too brittle to use as masts.

While many fortunes were built on the new plants, few of the explorers actually profited from their discoveries. Apart from satisfying their scientific curiosity, the only reward many ever received was the right to name plants after themselves or their patrons. David Douglas (1799-1834), an intrepid Scot sent to America in 1823, braved hypothermia and grizzly bear attacks before a fatal fall into a pit intended to trap wild boars. But his name lives on in every lumber yard, on stacks of Douglas Fir. (Not to be confused with a lumberyard cat I once knew, who went by the name of Douglas Fur.) Thomas Jefferson got Congress to fund the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and now the twinleaf, *Jeffersonia diphylla*, bears his name. Our state flower, mountain laurel, is officially *Kalmia latifolia*. It was named for Pehr Kalm, a Swede sent to New England to find plants that would grow back home. The name was suggested by none other than Carl Linnaeus, creator of the botanical classification system we still use today. A more recent explorer, Richard Evans Schultes, specialized in medicinal and hallucinogenic plants. (His PhD. topic was magic mushrooms. Really.) He roamed South America, particularly the Amazon, earning the title of "Father of Ethnobotany," and we can only imagine his excitement when a fellow traveler who was an entomologist named a newly discovered cockroach genus after him.

As I read, I was struck by how many plants we assume are native are actually anything but. Those orange daylilies by the roadside? Asian. The Queen Anne's Lace in the meadow? A wild carrot that made its way from Afghanistan to Europe and then to North America, and was already identified as a nuisance weed in Connecticut by 1881. Oxeye daisies and bachelors' buttons traveled from Asia to Europe centuries ago, flourished in the fields, then were brought here in the 1600s.

Some of these so-called "naturalized" plants came by chance—seeds or roots hitch-hiking in the soil of other plants, or even clinging to clothing or animal fur on ships crossing the Atlantic. Others were brought here on purpose: Bittersweet was imported for its decorative value; kudzu was supposed to prevent erosion; barberry was touted as a thorny burglar-proof barrier, ideal for suburban foundation planting. And dandelions were carefully transported by early European settlers, who valued it for salad, medicinal roots, and wine. Even today, specialty seed catalogs offer choice dandelion varieties.

Plant explorers changed the world, sometimes for the better, sometimes not, and botanists still search the world for new specimens. They will give their names to their discoveries, just as their predecessors did. As for me, if I ever get naming rights to a cockroach, I'm going to call it "Forsythia."