

## Plant Lovers Almanac

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Shall this winter never end? I have it on good authority that it shall. A week ago, I attended the Summit County Master Gardener Saturday Gardening Series in Green, and it was indeed a “green” experience. Each table had a centerpiece of garden fence within which were cold-tolerant pansies, tiny onion seedlings, and swiss chard. All other appearances notwithstanding, this wild and woolly winter will wither and the vines (unfortunately with some grapevines not making it through) and flowers and fruits and trees and shrubs and grasses will follow.

One of the images I used at the program was of a picture of croci blooming in my yard, taken on February 26, 2012, certainly much earlier than this year, but the crocus shall come. And spring! Let us listen. From A.A. Milne: “*She turned to the sunlight/And shook her yellow head,/And whispered to her neighbor/Winter is dead*”. From Rainer Marie Rilke: “*It is spring again./The earth is like a child that knows poems by heart.*” From William Shakespeare: “*April hath put a spirit of youth in everything*”. And finally, from Charlotte Bronte in *Jane Eyre*: “*The Spring drew on...and a greenness grew over those brown beds, which, freshening daily, suggested the thought that Hope traversed them at night, and left each morning brighter traces of her steps.*”

I feel warmer already. Thinking of spring alone can help. Saturday’s talk of herbs helped, as did those of vegetable gardening, and conifers, and our state native fruit tree – pawpaw, and before all that, maple syruping to come in the next few weeks, and after all that, a trip of Summit Countians to the wonderful High Line park in lower Manhattan come September, led by OSU Extension, Summit County educator Danae Wolfe. Oh, what a wondrous world in which we live.

### **The Last Name That Plant Contest.**

The winner of the last contest was Shane Lowrey, who will receive a copy of *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold. He correctly identified the last mystery plant in the rose family as medlar (*Mespilus*).

Medlar is a shrub to small tree that is undergoing something of a renaissance among edible landscape gardeners, returning to popularity a plant that was much-used during the Roman Empire and much-cited in literature during the Shakespearean age. Its reputation was a bit sullied due to the nature of its fruits; they are harvested only after they brown and rot on the tree following cold weather, a process known as “bletting”. This tendency of rotting before ripening was much bawdified by Shakespeare and others, and of course is not as convenient for impatient and warm-day gardeners of subsequent centuries. Yet it arises anew.

There is a species native to the Middle East and one native to North America and it is truly rather interesting, which is easy for me to say, as I munch some toast smeared with Lois Rose’s medlar jam the morning I write this. Like a plum jam. As noted in the clues last time and reinforced by the picture then, the spiny leaf-like sepals surround a central pit of the fruit that develops following pollination, fertilization, and the ovary of the flower ripening around the fertilized eggs and becoming the fruit. This characteristic hollow appearance of the mature fruit led Shakespeare to term medlars “open arses”. Ahem.

After bletting frosts, medlars wrinkle, soften, brown, with the interior becoming the texture of something like apple sauce, and are then eaten raw, served as medlar cheese which is like lemon curd, only earthier, or turned into jams and such. Again, quite tasty. Medlar (the genus *Mespilus*) scions are often grafted to their rose family cousins, such as pear (*Pyrus*), hawthorn (*Crataegus*), and quince (*Cydonia*), once again proving the wisdom of botanists and their classification of families, which are groups of related genera. In fact, several "Almanac" contestants guessed quince as the mystery plant. Close.

The inimitable Cuyahoga Master Gardener Lois Rose pronounced this past year as her best ever year for medlar harvests in her garden of endless edible and ornamental delights and as noted in the earlier column this crop yielded enough bletted fruit to provide ample samples of medlar jam to accompany the College of Wooster's Arbor Day celebration the last week of April, when they plant...a medlar tree. Then we shall not exactly mirror Cervantes creations of Don Quixote and Sancho Pancho who "Stretch themselves out in the middle of a field and stuff themselves with acorns or medlars.", but we will enjoy a tasty, unusual, and increasingly popular retro treat. No acorns though.

### **The New Name That Plant Contest**

This time for our mystery plant, let us pick a most beautiful deciduous conifer that grows well here in Ohio, especially in wet sites. Glorious light green foliage freshening up the spring, summers of a darker green, autumns of spun-gold fall foliage color, and graceful branch and twig structure in the winter. If you identify this plant, Monty Python will be proud. If not, does it make you want to go home?

The first to e-mail or text me this Saturday will get a copy of Aldo Leopold's conservationist classic, *A Sand County Almanac*. E-mail is chatfield.1@osu.edu. Phone is 330-466-0270.

*A Sand County Almanac* is one of the books we use in my Sustainable Landscape Maintenance class at the OSU Main Campus in Columbus. Each session one of the students shares something they learned from our great mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Wisconsinite conservationist. Let us close with this example, that opens the "March" section of Part 1 of *A Sand County Almanac*:

*"One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving the murk of a March thaw, is the spring. A cardinal whistling spring to a thaw but later finding himself mistaken, can retrieve his error by resuming his winter silence. A chipmunk, emerging for a sunbath but finding a blizzard, has only to go back to bed. But a migrating goose, staking two hundred miles of black night on the chance of finding a hole in a lake, has no easy chance for retreat. His arrival carries the conviction of a prophet who has burned his bridges."*

To paraphrase Shelley and Leopold: If geese have come, can spring be far behind!

