

Plant Lovers Almanac

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Last week I gave one of my periodic Weird Things in the Woods talks to a group of educators at Camp Oty'Okwa in the Hocking Hills. This Big Brothers Big Sisters camp ("Life on a Sandy Delta") is quite beautiful, near truly world-class Blackhand sandstone formations that produced Conkle's Hollow, Old Man's Cave, Ash Cave and the misnamed Cedar (they should have called it Hemlock) Falls! We looked at loads of insect and mite galls on trees in the woods. These abnormal growths are one of Nature's weirdest things, in which certain insects and mites through feeding and egg-laying hijack plant leaf and stem cells and instead of producing normal tissue, cause the plant to produce characteristic protective and nutritious homes for buggy eggs to hatch.

Weird things were on my mind into last weekend. At Silver Creek Metro Park there were black saddlebags skimmer dragonflies (*Tramea lacerata*) in the upper meadow. Poison ivy glistened amongst the multiflora roses. Rose rosette virus caused those multiflora roses to develop torturously twisted shoots with a reddish cast, once hoped for as a biological control of this invasive rose species, but not damaging enough as a realistic control. Instead, eriophyid mite vectors have transmitted the virus to our garden roses, much to the distress of rosarians who clamor for an effective control. Alas, other than rogueing out affected plants, there is little we can do; miticides to control the vectors is a difficult and not very effective path, and we do not have virusides.

What really got my weird detector going last weekend, though, was a trip to the beech woods of the Girdled Road Reservation of the Lake County Metroparks. American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) has its share of weird things, from the very serious beech bark disease (involving the beech bark scale and a species of *Nectria* fungus) that has devastated beech woodlands mostly to the east of us but has been identified in northeast Ohio, to the interesting but apparently trivial beech blight aphid. The beech blight aphid truly is a weird thing to see, with the "boogie-woogie" aphids waving in unison in all their waxy coverings when larger beasts such as ourselves come near, to the tawny then black sooty mold fungus (*Scolias spongiosa*) that next develops on the accretions of sappy honeydew excreted by the aphids that develop in branch crotches on the forest floor and on other plants below.

A different phenomenon, though, is underway now on the beeches, at least in northeast Ohio. John Pogacnik, biologist extraordinaire of the Lake Metroparks rang the bell this spring with his observations of a worsening of something he had noted for some time: serious and widespread shriveling of American beech foliage, especially on lower branches, accompanied by a series of symptoms, ranging from puckering, bands of deep green interspersed with lighter greens and yellows, leaf death and in some cases, tree death. A group of weird things in the woods, including John, Mark Gilson, President of Gilson Gardens, Inc. who helped arouse interest in the problem along with John, and the new urban forester at Holden Arboretum, Chadwick Clink, along with myself, met at the Girdled Road Reservation.

We all had different perspectives of what we would see. I expected to see some curled leaves with some cast skins of aphids and some associated yellowing that might have been due to viruses transmitted by the aphids, though it was obvious that the problem John was describing was more serious and widespread. The extent of the problem, and the unknown nature of its cause, though, shocked us all, though John was well versed in how bad this had become in the parks where it occurred and the progressive nature of the damage.

John was in contact with many, including the Agricultural Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture in Beltsville, Maryland. Nancy Taylor of OSU and the Ohio Plant Diagnostic Network which involves the Ohio Department of Agriculture and OSU knew about John's observations. So we collected samples on a mid-June Saturday morning and they were sent off to labs in Beltsville and in Reynoldsburg. Hopefully we will soon know more of the cause of the problem and its consequences and potential management and you will read more about it in the Buckeye Yard and Garden Line (bygl.osu.edu).

Certainly this is an example that with clear eyes and a full hearts, starting with John Pogacnik, we can better define what is happening in the woods and the part of the woods that has the potential to impact natural areas and horticulture. Hopefully we will begin to answer questions such as: Is this a problem just of American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) or is it potentially a problem of European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) and its many cultivars?

Just how serious is it? If it is a pathogen such as a virus (symptoms seem suggestive and several different viruses are known to occur on beech in Germany) how is it being transmitted and does it have anything to do with the eriophyid mites that cause erineum patches on woodland beeches? These mites are clearly present on many of the affected beeches in Lake County, but do they have anything to do with this problem? Stay tuned.

Name That Plant Contest. Shane Lowery did it again with the latest contest three weeks ago. He identified the flower on the plant with glossy green leaves as a black gum, also known as sour gum, tupelo, and by its Latin name as *Nyssa sylvatica*. This is a great native tree. Those flowers turn into blue fruits later in the summer and then in fall the scarlet fall foliage outshines even red maples. As to the next Name That Plant contest, let us put the contest on hold until next Winter. Let us forsake this contest from today, our Summer Solstice, to the Winter Solstice, December 21. As Thoreau said: "I love best to have each thing in its season only, and enjoy doing without it at all other times."

Which brings us to one last weird thing, seen and photographed two weekends ago on a trip taken to Concord Massachusetts and Walden Pond. Check out the accompanying photo: the ultimate shocker – Thoreau Confronts the Modern World!