

Plant Lover's Almanac

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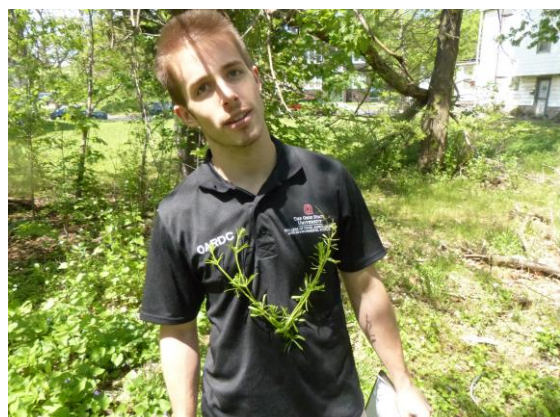
Summer has arrived, or so it seems this week. How soon we forget flirting with frosts just last week. But now, head out for some walks: on urban streets, suburban parks, and rural woodlands. A friend gave me a cool little handbook for the High Line Park in Manhattan that I love to visit. Its subtitle is “For Flaneurs, Cosmopolitans & Bon Vivants”. In looking up the meaning of “flaneur” I was pleased to see it does rather describe me: it means “stroller” or “urban wanderer”, and that a flaneur is “similar to boulevardier”.

There were a few somewhat mildly pejorative terms in the definition, such as “idler” as well as many literary references, but I think we should take notice of this word. It is the time to stroll, to cultivate our inner gardens by simply observing. The hard work of digging and getting the lawn mown may sometimes seem chores, as may lugging a huge backpack on longer hikes, but also take the time, perhaps even when pursuing these “chores” to observe, wander and wonder, take some time to be a flaneur or flaneurette each day.

Enjoy the Chinese dogwood postscripts to our native flowering dogwoods. Stalk the fringed polygala wildflower and appreciate the sun-backlit leaves of purple smokebush. Wonder at why the sycamore leaves and canopy are so lean this spring Learn how to identify the American elms that are still among us and how they differ from Siberian elms. Note: the teeth on the edges of the leaves are double and pointed for American elms and single and more rounded for Siberian elms. Discover truncated domes where the sidewalk meets the road. Learn about the Rubiaceae family of plants. Speaking of which...



Smokebush aflame (JC)



Christopher Riley wearing some stick-tight (JC)

Rubiaceae. I was in Cleveland recently with Christopher Riley, a graduate student in Entomology at OSU, working with Dr. Mary Gardiner, identifying the structure and function of the plants and of the insect, spiders and mites growing in vacant lots and other areas there. We think of vacant lots, as well, vacant. But there is much life there, including habitats for many beneficial insects and spiders. And plants, one of which was a “weed” that many callers to Extension offices this spring say is particularly prevalent.

In that Cleveland lot, we identified the weed as *Galium aparine* or sticktight, an herbaceous plant in the bedstraw or madder family, the Rubiaceae. Alright, on the spot, we just knew it as sticktight, the rest we had to look up. To decode, the two-part Latin name *Galium aparine*, is the species, meaning it will not interbreed with other species. *Galium* is the genus name, meaning this genus is composed of related but differently-breeding species And the family is a group of related “genuses”, known as genera.

What we learned about the Rubiaceae was surprising. I knew plants in this family from my earliest college days of wildflower awareness, for the lovely simplicity of the four-petaled (blue with yellow centers) bluets, *Houstonia caerulea*. I had forgotten that the Rubiaceae is a big deal, in fact the 4th largest flowering plant family in terms of the number of species. This includes the clarion call to the new day for many of us, *Coffea*, the plant genus that jump starts each day.

Also in the Rubiaceae is *Gardenia*, with its powerfully floral scents. And the genus *Cinchona*, the plant from which quinine was developed as an antimalarial drug, which was the long-time treatment of choice for countering the plasmodial pathogen that mosquitoes transmit southward of us in northeast Ohio. Our native wetland plant, buttonbush (*Cephalanthus*) is also among some 11,000-14,000 species in over 600 genera in the Rubiaceae.

But back to *Galium aparine*. It has some wonderfully evocative common names, especially those associated with its hooked hairs that give it the sticktight denomination. Other names are cleavers, goosegrass (they love to eat it), catchweed, velcro weed, sticky willy (what would Hillary say!), and robin-run-the-hedge, which even Monty Python would love. As for stick-tight, try it out, pick up some of its sticky stems, flowering now with little white flowers, and hurl it at your best friend, preferably on their backs where they cannot see it, and it will...cleave.



Sharp, double-toothed American elm leaves (JC)

Invasive Benefits? But I digress. A main goal on this Cleveland day was working with Christopher Riley on tree ID, of which already he was way ahead of me, but still, we focused on those American elms vs. Siberian elms among many others. The reason for this was a part of his project that involves estimating the environmental services of the trees in these lots, both native and non-native. Invasive non-natives, such as Siberian elm and Callery pears are generally only thought of negatively, replacing our native plants.

Christopher and Mary Gardiner and fellow OSU entomologist Dan Herms as well as the Davey Tree Expert Company, though, are asking the question of what positives these invasives also provide, such as the environmental services, such as storm water remediation, air quality benefits, carbon sequestration, energy savings if near habitations: those services elucidated and incorporated in the i-tree model (www.itreetools.org/ / www.treebenefits.com). Just because invasives are not natives does not disqualify them from providing these services. As wildlife conservationist Mark Davis noted in a 2011 paper in the journal 'Nature': "*It is time for conservationists to focus much more on the functions of species, and much less on where they originated.*"



Rounded, single teeth on edge of Siberian elm leaves (JC)

So, it was a cool day, unlike our recent heat, learning and relearning plant identification and to think about nature and nurture in a different light. Speaking of seeing with new eyes, another recent mid-May walk was with Beau Mastrine and Phil Olsen of the College of Wooster Grounds Department, and Kenny Cochran, the emeritus curator of OSU's Sequest Arboretum at the OARDC in Wooster.



Camperdown elm on the College of Wooster campus (JC)

Tactile Paving. We were walking at the truly beautiful campus and arboretum of the College of Wooster, worth a drive or hike for all in northeast Ohio. We admired the emerging *Cornus kousa* and the end of the spring run of *Cornus florida* and the hybrids thereof, and we appreciated the resilience of Camperdown elms. We learned the secret nuances of the Arboretum, that elderberry (*Sambucus*) was planted on campus to channel the interests of the students at the College of Wooster who play the Harry Potter-inspired Quidditch Games. Elder wands are the most magical of staffs and elderflower wine is also of Quidditchish lore. Beau and Phil and the rest of the staff

there go to great lengths to not only provide these hidden gems but also to plant unusual species on campus, such as medlars, cherrybark oaks, and yellowhorn trees.

As I was holding forth on sycamore anthracnose disease, which is now causing these trees to look sparse but will resolve itself once weather is warmer and trees releaf, and how to identify cherry and related *Prunus* species by the glands on their petioles, and so on. Suddenly Beau asked me about...truncated domes.



Sycamore anthracnose this week. Don't worry – be happy! Trees will recover (Joe Boggs, OSU Extension)

Of which I knew nothing, even when he told me I was standing on them.

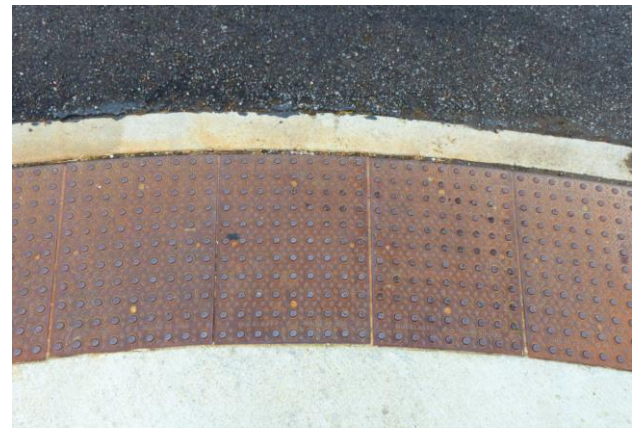


Camperdown elm is one tough tree, surviving on just a thin layer of vascular tissue under the bark (JC)

As Beau noted, there are indeed none so blind as those who do not see what is right beneath them, or as he knows I always say, quoting Shakespeare that, in Nature's infinite book of secrecy a little of us each do read. As it were and as I later learned, truncated domes are a form of raised tactile paving, used to alert visually impaired pedestrians, for example when a sidewalk intersects with a street. Tactile paving was developed first in Japan and then the UK and incorporated

into the American with Disabilities Act in the 1990s. It is an obvious thing for a grounds manager, steeped not only in the green aspects of landscapes, but in hardscapes as well.

Obviously, I have encountered truncated domes thousands of times, as have all flaneurs who walk city streets. These panels of truncated domes where the sidewalks meets the roadway serve a wonderful and now obvious purpose; now I "see", and, of course, more importantly it helps those with visual impairments to see in their minds-eye.



Truncated domes (JC)

Which brings us to a close with these mind-full observations of Helen Keller:

"I wondered how it was possible, to walk for an hour through the woods and see nothing of note. I who cannot see, find hundreds of things: The delicate symmetry of a leaf, the smooth skin of a silver birch, the rough, shaggy bark of a pine. I who am blind can give one hint to those who see: Use your eyes as if tomorrow you will be stricken blind...Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you would never taste or smell again. Make the most of each sense."