

Jim Chatfield

Ohio State University Extension

## For: May 13, 2017

This is one glorious spring for northeast Ohio. It arrived early and we had warmer than normal days in March, accumulating heat units resulting in early flowers. Forsythias began to emerge, frosted and were stalled, then surviving buds burst and we had an extended butter yellow show. Crabapples were beautiful in their coral pink to showy white versions, though truly hot weather meant a short reign. For many other plants, though, several sequences of very warm weather resulting in bloom and then a week or so of cooler weather kept blooms around for longer periods. Redbuds come to mind.

Though green leaves are becoming the prominent color, do not these flowers forget: remember what has just past and look each day for flowering anew. Yet those spring flowers to date – oh my. A lovely tradition of celebrating diversity (Oslava Květin) was started by Norbert Čapek, a Czech Unitarian in 1923, with flowers as symbols of the universality of nature and ecumenical love.

Start your own flower celebration in your home, for every business meeting, with your customers, sharing the beauty of flowers – especially this time of year: this “lusty month of May” (from *Camelot*). Everyone bring a flower! Here are a few floral finery observations from my home and neighbors.

For example, if you have ferns, check out if their expanding fronds are funneled around – even a lowly weed – such as purple dead nettle or sticktight, as they were in my yard. What an insider treat! Or take maples, such as the unusually-shaped leaves (for maple) of hornbeam maple (*Acer carpinifolium*). And if maples flower, can oaks be far behind?

We sometimes forget that male oak flowers are quite showy in mass. On volunteer pin oaks (*Quercus palustris*) in my back yard, there are emerging leaves and male flowers (catkins). Male flowers form on last year's stems while female flowers form on new stems on the same plant (oaks are monoecious = one house). For pin oaks and other red oak species the fruit of their labors, the acorn, takes two years to develop. There is a poem there somewhere. Something like...

*Old stems and new*

*Who knew who knew*

*Acorns in two*

*On red oaks are due.*

Speaking of flowers, enquiring minds want to know if last weekend's frosts damaged our future fruit? The key to this type of question is a combination of what stage flowers are in when cold arrives and how long it gets and for how long. Fortunately fruit trees were far enough along that fruits were no longer vulnerable to the temperatures we had, mostly at 32 and above, and if below not very far below and not for long. Key concerns were for strawberries and blueberries and for the immediate Akron area it appears there was only minor damage, though growers did use row covers. Further north and east in Ohio there were pockets of serious flower-damaging frosts for berries. Alas.

Speaking of fruits, a question often asked about strawberries is “why are the seeds growing on the outside of the fruit when fruits are defined as ovaries that ripen around the fertilized eggs that become seeds?” Well, it turns out that the sweet “fruits” of strawberries are actually not fruits, but rather the swollen receptacles (flower and fruit stalks of strawberries) to which flower parts of the strawberry were attached. The one-seeded dry, seed-like true fruits of strawberries on the outside of the swollen receptacles are what casual observers, like me, thought were seeds.

You may then also ask, if fruits are defined as ovaries at the base of the flowers that ripen around seeds then is not a tomato a fruit? Yes, botanically that is exactly what it is; though tomatoes are defined as vegetables by old culinary standards and commercially by legal standards involving tariff laws – vegetable imports to the U.S. were protected, fruits were not. Went all the way to the Supreme Court!

Anyway, the juicy red of the strawberry you eat is *not* a fruit and the juicy red tomato you eat *is* a fruit. The mind spins.

To close: One last plant to consider, in leaf and flower, one of my native tree favorites, the young, dried leaves of which give us “file” powder that provides an earthy flavor and thickening agent for certain gumbo recipes. Sassafras. Enjoy their leaves season-long, and never again miss their chartreuse flower show just past. Remembrance of things past is not just a Proustian trope. Memories of flowers past shall focus you on enjoying flowers present and yet to come.