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The past, the present, the future – these are constantly on the minds of plant lovers. Like Proust's madelines, the remembrance of a beloved lilac or forsythia, past or often in reality a parent's warm home where once those flowers grew, now renewed in the present and into the future years from a cutting or transplanted living memory; these are powerful connections. So, let us look with botanical eyes at the past, the present and the future.

**The Past.** For the past, how about a book review? Remember that New Year Resolution this year or years past: to read more. My recommendation is a wondrous book by Andrea Wulf, titled *The Invention of Nature: Alexander Von Humboldt's New World*.

How is this for reviews of this life: “*One of the great ornaments of his age.*” from Thomas Jefferson. “*Nothing ever stimulated my zeal so much as reading ‘Humboldt's Personal Narrative’*” from Charles Darwin, and according to Andrea Wulf “*...saying he would not have boarded the Beagle, nor conceived of the ‘Origin of Species’ without Humboldt.*”

Quoting from Wulf: “*William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge incorporated Humboldt's concept of nature into their poetry... Henry David Thoreau found in Humboldt's book an answer to his dilemma of how to be both a poet and a ‘naturalist’...Simon Bolivar, the revolutionary that liberated South America from Spanish rule, called Humboldt the ‘discover of the New World’*”. Goethe, both a botanist and a poet, noted that “*spending a day with Humboldt was like having lived several years.*” The book paints wonderful scenes of Goethe and Schiller and Humboldt and their mid-morning philosophizing in Schiller's garden in Jena, Germany. This in the early 1800's when natural philosophy included sciences such as geology and biology and zoology, and poetry and prose, and philosophical musings.

Humboldt soon departed for his life-changing and world-changing expeditions to South America where he recorded, described and collected plants, made geological observations, measured meteorological phenomena, and like Darwin decades later engendered the intellectual ferment that populated his developing theories of the animate and inanimate world. From this Humboldt developed his theory of the interconnectedness of the natural world, elucidating early theories of ecology, influencing everyone from Darwin to John Muir. His opus “*Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*” predates everyone's sense of that interdependence. He almost called *Cosmos Ga'a*, an early presentiment of the Gaia hypothesis which emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, that takes such interdependence to the next level of scientific thought.

Wulf posits that more places are named for Humboldt than any other person, from the Humboldt Current to Humboldt Redwoods Park in northern California to, Mare Humboltiana on the Moon. There are over 300 plants and over 100 animals named for Humboldt, including the Humboldt Squid. And I must say, the truly other-worldly flavor of Humboldt Fog goat cheese.

To me, though, this is the real kicker, especially as it relates to “how soon we forget”. At the centennial of Humboldt's birth in 1869 (he lived from 1769-1859) there were parties in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the

Americas. In Russia he was hailed as the “Shakespeare” of Science. There were public lectures from Adelaide to Buenos Aires, from San Francisco to Philadelphia. Those of you familiar with New York City may remember the Humboldt bust as you emerge from Central Park West. Twenty-five thousand celebrated in the Big Apple for the Centennial, 80,000 in Berlin. But get this; according to Wulf: 8000 poured into the streets of Cleveland Ohio to celebrate Humboldt! And all of this from the short Prologue to the book.

Twas’ a different age when scientists were so feted. I encourage you to go to your local bookstore and to read this entertaining, readable, fascinating book about someone who loved the natural world, both living and unliving, and who still provides great insights into the interconnectedness of all things in this world of ours – and to the merging of arts and sciences, so much clearer to people of an earlier age. I take it back. I see this growing awareness and sensitivity to interconnectedness in my students at Ohio State University, and despite all concerns to the contrary, much of the credit for this goes to the Internet. At any rate I am about to go order my second dozen copies of this book from the Wooster Book Company for students past, present, and future.

**The Present.** Just before Christmas I wrote of forsythias and rhododendrons blooming out of season. Then between Christmas and New Year’s OSU entomologist Dan Herms reported an ornamental cherry blooming near Lexington Kentucky and another OSU entomologist Curtis Young reported an ornamental cherry blooming in Pittsburgh. Then, on January 2, my wife Laura and I were heading to our 39<sup>th</sup> anniversary dinner). Laura called out that she saw magnolias in full bloom. I was busy heading to a parking space and expressed disbelief. As we approached the 7<sup>th</sup> and Penn Park near the Convention Center though, I had to agree, saucer magnolias in full bloom!

Well, some of you know the rest of the story, of course. This is Tony Tasset’s award- winning Magnolias in Pittsburgh sculpture, 800 painted bronze magnolia petals amidst some real magnolia trees in the park. His goal is “to create a little magic, fairy-tale moment in the daily hustle and bustle of downtown Pittsburgh” Mission accomplished. Not City of Steel Magnolias, but delightful promises of springtime to come.

Well, the weather has become more frigid since those very early winter days, and though those cherry blossoms have since frozen, the bronze magnolias – and the cherry trees themselves still prevail. What does it all mean, though, for trees and shrubs? Well, concerns over weather and climate are timeless: as Mark Twain quipped, “*Climate is what we expect, weather is what we get.*” Setting El Nino’s and climate aside for a later article, our weather that we got this fall and the first few weeks of winter was extremely unusual, setting a number of records. For example, in Akron, the average temperature for December was 44.5 degrees, roughly comparable to the average December temperature for Atlanta, Georgia.

For some specific concerns relative to the landscape:

- 1). Tim Malinich of OSU Extension in Huron County poetically notes, there will be a “*Loss of bloom for precocious bloomers*”. For the sparsely flowering forsythia and the spotty blooms on rhododendron this will probably not even be noticeable in the spring. For the flowering cherries, ornamental effect may indeed be a low show for spring.
- 2). For woody plants, the first test of the winter season will be how rapidly temperatures drop. Freezing of water into ice crystals for intercellular water even of dormant plants in unusually warm winter weather is always a concern. Concern may be multiplied this year due to the missing autumn, but the closer to normal 30s-40s in the day and 20s at night that during New Year’s week succeeded the 50s-60s of Christmas week was probably useful,

providing more normal fall-ish weather. Naturally, this issue will possibly repeat, and all depends on the January-March weather to come.

Sudden drops from seasonably unusually warm weather is usually the biggest culprit in killing stem tissue, though severe low temperature freezes that affect stem and root survival is also a concern, but will simply just be “what we get”. Mulching can provide some moderation.

3). Bee gardeners should note the words of Barb Bloetscher, from the Ohio Department of Agriculture , who notes that: *“The honey bees have been active through fall and Nov-Dec. reports of them bringing in pollen during the first 2 weeks of December. With honey bees still active and very little nectar/ pollen available, they are eating stored pollen and honey which could deplete the amount of food necessary to survive winter and early spring. Researchers are seeing and predicting losses throughout the northeastern and northern U.S. “*

**The Future.** As to the future – well, we shall see. As noted possible damage to stem tissue is still an open question. As for cherry blossoms, Erik Draper of OSU Extension in Geauga County notes that he did not see the types of cherries in our fruit orchards with “precocious” blooms. So, hopefully they will be fine and not already spent for 2016. As for the complicated formula of flowering that is mediated by heat units, chilling units, photoperiod, and other factors, that is a matter for...the future.

To close:

From the Jewish Arbor Day tradition, Tu Bishvat, the “New Year for Trees” celebration, comes this closing:

*“It is the New Year of Trees, but here the ground is frozen under the crust of snow. The trees snooze, their buds tight as nuts. Rhododendron leaves roll up their stiff scrolls.”*