

NATIVE PLANTS OF LAKEMOOR



Lakemoor Development's setting has the attributes of a park. The luxuriant growth of trees, shrubs and herbs attracted me at first sight, and during the time we've made our home here, have been a source of increasing pleasure. The plants are enjoyable in themselves and because they provide a habitat for other living things. In these surroundings, it has been possible to become acquainted with the daily routines of douglas squirrels, chipmunks and the little emerald-green tree frogs. Glimpses of mountain beavers, otters, rabbits and—even now—occasional deer enrich the days. As seasons progress migrant birds come to harvest the native crops in seemingly endless variety, while a number of birds remain year-round in our community.

Even as the area becomes more populous, much of the wilderness charm remains, because many residents have left portions of their yards in native state. The use of natives in landscaping has many advantages, not the least of which is the delightful economy of this approach. Native plants are free, require no expensive equipment for their upkeep, and free the homeowner from the necessity of buying insecticides and fertilizers. Perfectly adapted to the existing conditions, they grow healthy and happy with the least amount of human interference. This yard approach is economical of time as well as dollars. Tedious mowing and sprinkling programs are not needed during the dry summers, no special precautions are required during unusually cold periods.

The land in this vicinity is catalogued by the U.S. Soil Conservation District in the soil survey of Thurston County as suited for growth of Douglas-Fir (although this was hardly news to the trees that have been growing here for centuries, it tidies things up nicely to have the stamp of government approval on the activity). Plant identification manuals describe the other plants that grow here as ones adapted to life in Douglas-Fir forests. Our native plants are well suited to conditions here, but these conditions are enormously frustrating to the gardener who aspires to a conventional yard. There are drainage problems from hardpan, vast quantities of rock, highly acid, iron-poor soil and—in many lots—difficult slopes. As landscaping for individual lots is planned, the impact this will have on the surrounding area deserves consideration too. In our neighborhood, the small lake ultimately receives much of the fertilizer and insecticide that is applied to lawns and shrubbery, since storm sewers drain into the lake. By this same channel, the lake receives silt that rain washes from areas denuded in construction.

A rich variety of suitable natives is available to the homeowner in our area. There follows a discussion of some that have become familiar to me. Although it is far from a complete list, it is hoped that it will stimulate appreciation of our wildwood setting.

SOME TREES.....

The most obvious and abundant tree here is, of course, the Douglas-Fir, which also happens to be one of the region's biggest exports. Although they seem rather large to me, by Douglas-Fir standards, our local trees are mere teenagers with the potential of reaching two hundred feet in height with trunk diameters of three or four feet. In shaded areas such as ours, the trees habitually lose their lower limbs, thus supplying households with fireplace kindling on a regular basis. In bygone days, local Indians chewed fir pitch for gum, brewed tonic tea from its needles and burned its cones in religious ceremonies. Today the tree continues to find a place in ceremonies—for it is the most widely used Christmas tree.

Western Hemlock, another native evergreen, is also widely harvested in Washington for lumber and for paper pulp. Perhaps this paper on which the word Hemlock is printed is, itself, Hemlock. In maturity, this tree can achieve the height of one hundred and sixty feet. The miniature cones of the Hemlock are found in great numbers along its gracefully drooping boughs until midwinter, when they fall to the ground.

We have some Western Yews here. They look to me like Hemlocks in need of a haircut, since they have a disorderly habit of sending out twigs all up the central trunk. However, it is a simple matter to sort them out from Hemlock by identifying the tiny sharp prong on the tip of each needle, and noticing that Yews produce berries instead of cones. Yew wood is famous for its strength, and Indians made extensive use of it in the construction of bows, fishing net frames and canoes.

Western Red Cedars, also found here, have been extensively harvested commercially. Stumps of the huge ones which once grew here are apparent throughout the area, many small ones remain. Their graceful growing habit and enchanting fragrance make them very welcome.

The startling red-orange trunk and branches of the Madrona make it a standout on the scene, and it is also very noticeable in winter, since it is the only leafed tree that retains its foliage here. The glossiness of the leaves prevents water from remaining on them, and thus protects them from ice damage during freezing weather. The presence of this tree indicates rock or hard subsoil lies not far beneath the surface.

Largest of the local deciduous trees is the Big Leaf Maple. In the open, it will grow to eighty feet tall, and is often seen with numerous branches growing into upright stems along the trunk. The foliage makes a brilliant fall display, later

it is excellent composte. The rough bark of the maple is the perfect growing site for exquisite mosses and tiny ferns which spread beyond, protected by the heavy shade and moisture-holding mulch of fallen leaves. Seeds from the tree waft to the ground on little wings, in early spring blankets of tiny maples appear, but most of these little trees are doomed to die in summer drouth.

Stands of Alder grow in the low moist areas. These little trees form dense thickets, they are both hardy and prolithic. Alder wood is widely used in fireplaces, to a more limited extent as lumber. In wintertime, the startling pattern of the neighborhood Alder groves in snow is a treasure of a sight, as is the occasion of their leafing out in early spring.

Probably the most revered deciduous tree in our area is the Dogwood. When May arrives, it is a celebration of flowering Dogwoods! Do we have a thousand Dogwoods in Lakemoor? There can never be too many! If you are blessed with one, protect the vegetation around the tree's base, for little Dogwoods insist upon insulated beds and will rebel by refusing to bloom or even by dying if their surroundings are tampered with excessively. Dogwoods make their decision to bloom based upon hours of daylight and air temperature, so will occasionally have minor displays in fall too.

Cascara trees are so self-effacing that they are nearly invisible. Tucked away near other trees or shrubs, they send up a long narrow trunk, and, well above the normal line of sight, send out a few shy branches with a few twigs carrying a few leaves. Such a quiet and modest tree is no trouble, and there is a sort of whimsy to having a laxative growing in the yard.

SOME SHRUBS.....

Hazels choose the same general areas as Dogwood, perhaps preferring a bit more sunshine. They habitually spread out, shoot by shoot, from an already crowded base, so when in leaf, form a rounded shrub that grows to twenty feet high. They are at their finest, I think, during those empty February days when their delicate tips are decorated with long yellow catkins. And if you maintain a resident Hazel, you probably have a resident squirrel for a bonus.

Oceanspray—or Arrow-wood or Ironwood, as it is also known—must be our most widely distributed shrub here. Straight narrow stalks grow out from a central base. In late spring, great clumps of creamy white blooms drape from new growth. The supple shrub moves gracefully in the slightest breeze, and when they are in bloom are the easiest thing around to look upon. If one restrains from removing the brown seed cluster that follows the bloom, these will be harvested by migrant

bushtits, who will arrive in a great flock one day in early autumn, and whose acrobatics will provide you with one of the most astonishing circuslike entertainments you'll ever witness. Ocean Spray leafs out early in spring, and after the barren winter, it is enormously satisfying to watch the rapidity with which the leaves grow. This shrub was used by Indians as a cooking skewer, since the hard wood doesn't burn readily, and for digging tools, spears and arrows. Ocean Spray is a wonderful plant, and very well adapted to the growing conditions here. A bare plot of land near our house, bulldozed during the building process, was totally covered with Ocean Spray two feet high in two years.

Berries, berries, berries! We have red and blue huckleberry, and both are highly prized by a variety of birds. Although the red huckleberry loses its leaves in winter, the tiny red berries stay on for bright spots during much of the winter. The growth pattern of Huckleberry reminds me of Japanese bonsai trees, and I find it pleasant to have the result without the work and unlimited patience required in that art. Huckleberries, of course, are edible, but the red ones are rather bland. We have Snowberry, whose white berries also remain on the bare twigs for winter pattern; We have Salmonberry for early spring bloom and we have—oh yes! indeed we have—Blackberry! Creeping across the ground, invading the tiniest recess, we have impossibly hardy Blackberry! If you have a wild patch that you only need visit once a year, then you can be assured of these succulent treats. Probably, no matter what you do, you will have Blackberry in your yard. We also have, in random open places, the less overwhelming Blackcap, which is a black Raspberry, and they are very delicious in flavor and without the pithy core of the Blackberry. Thimbleberry grows here and is readily recognized by its great maple-like leaves and its large white blooms. Service-Berry is also native to our area. Although many of these berries are less than gourmet eating to humans, they are worth preserving for their value to the birds.

Secretive Moneysuckle is usually first noticed when it is accidentally pulled up in a foray with Blackberry vines. The plant has sparse oval leaves appearing early in the season, followed in May by clusters of fragrant orange-red flowers. In September, orange berries appear on the vine.

Red Berry Elder springs up readily in cleared areas and achieves respectable size in a short period of time. Even as a young plant it will display clusters of white blossoms in April or May, follow that later in summer with red berries. The plant has no commercial use, is less than spectacular in leaf or bloom, but I rather respect it for making do and achieving respectable size in areas at which other plants turn up their roots. A five foot tall two year old Elder grows in a rock pile at my house!

Scotch Broom is becoming more widespread here each year. It is not a Northwest native, but was introduced in Vancouver B.C. by a British Settler and has made itself very much at home. May is the month when it is found in spectacular golden flower, and May is the month when it achieves a nasty reputation among people prone to allergies.

The growing of roses is a heavy responsibility, for they are known to be both capricious and demanding. The gardener thinks twice before taking on the burden of their care. He considers mildew and aphids, the dusting and pruning and feeding routine. Last year I had more roses in bloom than the most dedicated horticulturist. I didn't water, mulch, spend a cent, or even an hour on their care. True, my blooms were somewhat more modest—about the size of a dime—but I had real roses, most likely one of the ancestors from which all those great bloated roses sprung—and my roses were fragrant and pretty, and they brought pleasure during their long period of bloom. There are several varieties of wild roses in Washington, my roses and I have never agreed on just who they are.

Oregon Grape is high on the neighborhood-favorite-shrub list. We have two varieties here, one larger than the other. The holly-like leaves, just for the joy of it, it seems, occasionally turn red to become accent pieces in the yard. There is brilliant yellow flower in summer and tart purple fruit in early fall. Rumors constantly circulate that this fruit is poison. It is not, for I have eaten it with no ill effects other than a nasty taste in my mouth from its unpleasant flavor. I tend to agree with the Makah Indians who considered it to be Raven food, but reputedly, the flavor improves after being touched by frost. The root of Oregon Grape was the basis for yellow dye in Indian days.

Salal thrives beneath our Douglas-Firs, covering the ground with an evergreen blanket, providing food and shelter for Oregon Juncoes and Rufous-sided Towhees—two of the year-round birds. The bloom of salal, although inconspicuous, is very nicely engineered. It is a cluster of pink-white bells. These are followed by purple berries, which are nearly as delicious as Oregon Grape.

Twin-flower is a delicate little shrub with light green leaves that is often seen growing around the base of trees or larger shrubs. In June and July numerous pink twin bells, sweetly scented, are to be found.

SOME HERBS.....

It has been said that a weed is a plant nobody has found a use for. I suppose that when our society was agricultural, there was reason to eradicate Tansy from the fields, and that only a softhead would share the cabbage patch with dandelions.

But since our yards today are kept for solace and pleasure and are not planted to stave off starvation, perhaps it is time to cast off this word weed, so that we may look upon these little oxygen producers with an unprejudiced eye.

Which plants are weeds, anyway? Chickweed? That sounds obvious enough. If you had Star of Bethlehem growing in your yard, could you bear to pull up something with such a delightful title? Star of Bethlehem is another name for Chickweed. Dandelion is often considered a weed, but is, in fact, an edible food, more nutritious than most of the commercially sold greens. It happens that most of those little buttons of gold called dandelions growing here are not dandelions at all, although they do have a feline name; Harry Cat's Ear or Smooth Cat's Ear! Tansy Ragwort, I've known for many years, is a noxious weed, but I didn't know until two weeks ago that it is also the intricate little stalk: tipped with tiny discs that has been decoration in a vase here all winter.

One plant frequently identified as a weed, because of its widespread growth is Yarrow. Yet Sunset Garden Book recognizes this everyday plant with several mentions. It is suggested as accent plantings mixed with spire-like growing plants, it is a recommended ground cover and it reported as a favorite of flower arrangers because of the everlasting quality of the tiny white flowers. Yarrow has a place in history in many cultures. The I Ching is a philosophical work which has been continuously consulted in China for the past twenty-seven hundred years. Part of the ritual of using the oracle requires the use of fifty dried Yarrow stalks. The botanical name of Yarrow is Achillea, which it received because Achilles is reputed to have treated his soldiers wounds with it at the battle of Troy. In Sweden, Yarrow often replaces Hops in beer production. European folklore relating to this plant describes such uses as potent love charm, provider of courage for the timid, and remedy for toothache and nosebleed. Snohomish, Chehalis and Squaxin languages have names for Yarrow which mean "little squirrel tail"--good description for the lacey foliage. Indians used this herb in treatment of eye conditions, childbirth, tuberculosis, stomach ailments, diarrhea, skin rash and rheumatism. Its medicinal use has a sound basis, for the herb contains large quantities of tannic acid. How could a yard get along without an abundance of this versatile plant?

Of course, many of the plants here have never been considered weeds. Indeed, a number of them, far removed from their native habitat, are carefully nurtured specimen plants in yards in Los Angeles, London or Rome. Yellow Violets, Bleeding Heart and Colombine, all long prized in yards, grow wild here. We have such delicious sounding treats as Vanilla Leaf, Ginger Root and Licorice Fern.

In many areas, ferns can only be enjoyed as houseplants, but in addition to Licorice Fern, we have Bracken (which can become a six-footer), Sword Fern and Lady Fern.

Wildflowers are plentiful. The earliest bloom in my yard is on a Coltsfoot, which breaks into flower even before it unfolds its great leaves in March. April is when the beloved Trilliums appear and these flowers are accompanied by Star of Bethlehem, Siberian Miner's Lettuce, Buttercup and Yellow Violets. Nettles, Many-leafed Pea, Many-leafed Lupin, Star Flower, Vanilla Leaf, Bleeding Heart, Colombine, and Oregon Fairy Bells appear in bloom in May, and as the weather continues to warm, Wild Strawberries, Twin Flower, Pearly Everlasting, Wild Rose, St. Johnswort, and the majestic Fireweed add color in abundance to the local scene. There must be dozens more flowers here that have so far eluded my scrutiny.

LITTLE GROWING THINGS.....

In spring of 1972, I happened upon a Liverwort colony which had appeared to fill a low spot beside my house. I borrowed a section to bring inside for a few days, so that the formation of the fruiting stalks could be followed under a magnifying glass, and searched the house for reading material that would tell me what was happening. It was never quite clear, but I did learn that I was looking at what might very well be a replica of one of the very first land plants, and so I carried this bit of history back out into the yard where it looks very well for a thing of such vast age.

Mosses, Lichens and Mushrooms are other plants that abound in the region. I have identified the lush deep carpet of rather coarse moss as Spagnum, and can also recognize Hairy Cap moss, but since reading that twenty-three thousand species have been described by botanists, with a further division into subclasses, I have decided that to me, moss is moss. Little has been written about gardening with mosses, but the ones I've dealt with have been very cooperative. They seem quite willing to thrive wherever the conditions are reasonably similar to those where they were collected.

Within my own yard, I've seen five edible mushrooms: Orange Fairy Cup, Russula, Boletus, Common Laccaria and Morel. There are many others around, appearing in both Spring and Fall. Something interesting is taking place on every inch of land!

Not all the plants grow on land. Some grow on other plants. The lichen that covers the branches of the Douglas-Fir is, I surmise, the Wrinkled Shield Lichen. Like all lichens, it is actually a commune of two separate organisms—fungi and algae. The fungus contributes moisture-holding properties to the partnership, the alga does photosynthesis for them both. Although lichens have been repeatedly accused of causing death of trees on which they grow, this accusation would never hold up in

court. There is simply no firm evidence. Because one of their components carries out photosynthesis, the lichen is not a parasite. In fact, all sorts of lichens exist quite happily on stone.

The largest plant in our area is the Douglas-Fir, but I have no idea what plant is the smallest. Perhaps it is an alga growing in the lake. It is reasonable to speculate that there are innumerable plants surrounding us, not visible to the naked eye. What can be seen—the plants that range in size from moss blooms best enjoyed with aid of a hand lens, to the lofty Douglas-Fir—can provide hours of pleasure. Some of the books that have enhanced my appreciation of our native plants are: Trees, Shrubs and Flowers to Know in Washington by C. P. Lyons, Wild Flowers of the Pacific Coast by Leslie Haskin, Ferns of the Northwest by Theodore Frye, Ethnobotany of Western Washington by Erna Gunther, Forests of Lilliput, The Realm of Mosses and Lichens by John Bland, The Savory Wild Mushroom by Margaret McKenny, a Brooklyn Botanic Garden handbook called Gardening with Native Plants—which turned out to have an article about Northwest Natives written by Olympian Margaret McKenny, and, finally, The Herbalist by Joseph Meyer. Many of these publications were written some years ago, but all are still in print and all are comprehensible to even the most botanically ignorant lay person. Each of them has something interesting to say about what is going on right here in our own backyards.

Marjorie Yung
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