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# Root Concerns

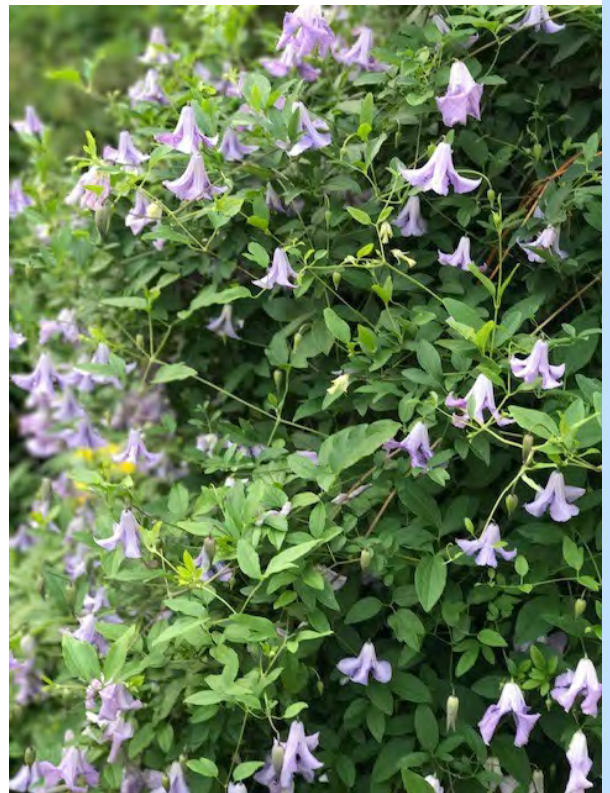
Notes from the underground

## *A Tale of Two Bettys*



It is mid-April and my annual fascination with the emerging plants has taken over. In particular, the clematis 'Betty Corning' is bounding skyward up through the surrounding obelisk that supports its exuberance. Last year's growth was cut back in March on a warm day that called me outside to begin the spring task of pruning and shaping. This clematis will begin blooming in a month or so and it will continue to flower for much of the summer with its lavender nodding bell shaped blossoms delighting all who see them, especially the bees.

There is much to like about 'Betty' as she is easy going and reliable. The flowers are not typical of most clematis and the density of the verticillate foliage sets them apart. Clematis 'Betty Corning' is unique and outstanding in her field, much like her name sake.



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Elizabeth Platt Corning grew up in Pennsylvania society, a child of privilege who had a close relationship with her mother, Dorothy.

An avid gardener and garden club member, Dorothy Platt excelled at flower arranging, needlepoint, and

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painting. Elizabeth (Betty) grew up learning these skills from her mother. After attending finishing school in Italy, Elizabeth was introduced to the young Erastus Corning who had just graduated from Yale. They seemed very compatible and their families agreed it would be a good match, so they married in 1932.

Early in the marriage, Erastus established an insurance company; he and Elizabeth had a son, Erastus Corning III and a daughter Elizabeth (Bettina) Corning. The young couple concentrated on their family until the war called Erastus to serve. After the war, Erastus became interested and involved in local politics as Betty became involved with the Fort Orange Garden Club, introduced by her mother-in-law Mrs. Edwin Corning (Louise). Like her own mother, Betty was able to be an active member of a garden club, and pursue her interests in needlework and flower arranging. As Erastus became more involved in politics, his life and Betty's ran on parallel tracks. As polished a lady as Betty Corning was, she was happiest as a dirt gardener. A year before her death in 1993, Betty spoke with then Times Union writer Paul Grondahl. "Gardening is a

way of life for me. I can't imagine life without it... the land around this house was all bare when I arrived and I planted everything here. When the first bird sets up its nest in a tree, that's when I feel I've done something worthwhile."

As a young mother, Betty was grateful for visits from her mother. On one such occasion Betty was keen to show her mother a vine that she had seen growing on a porch of an old house on Bertha Street in Albany. Mrs. Platt was equally as enthusiastic and she encouraged her daughter to knock on the door. The woman who lived there told the ladies that the vine had been there for the fifty years that she had lived there and that it was impossible to propagate. She suggested that they come with a shovel to dig up a piece with good roots and of course that is exactly what Betty did. While the vine grew well, Betty would spend the next two decades trying to identify and propagate it. The task would eventually fall to her son-in-law, Ted Dudley, who was a botanist with the Arnold Arboretum. Propagating the vine was the easier of the tasks as research failed to find another vine with the same characteristics. It was determined to be a hybrid of *Clematis viticellata*, but what to call it? Betty wanted it named for the City of Albany but there was already a clematis 'Dutchess of Albany.' The Arboretum decided to name it after the woman who saved it, Betty Corning. By 1975, the Arboretum was cloning and selling plants of the 'Betty Corning' clematis and today it is available by mail order or through many Arboretums. During the decades as a Fort Orange Garden Club member, Betty took on many roles and eventually served as president of the club. She also served a term as President of the Garden Club of America which gave her the opportunity to travel to many garden clubs across the country and she was fond of bringing a gift of her namesake plant if the growing zone was correct. Today you can find clematis 'Betty Corning' growing in many gardens across the US and the UK. The famous gardener and garden writer, Helen Dillion, whose garden in Dublin has a lattice separating the garden and in summer it is covered by a clematis vine with nodding lavender bells. The gardener working there when asked about the clematis, said that she had heard that it had come as a gift from "an old lady in America."

Sources: Archives of the Fort Orange Garden Club; Times Union, Reporter Judy Shepard: April 18, 1984; Times Union, Reporter Paul Grondahl: September 27, 1992; Times Union, Reporter Carol deMare: September 4, 1993



## *Stumped briefly by stunt*

The giant corpse flower, which takes a decade to bloom and stinks like rotting meat, makes a good morning newscast story. And while I agree that everyone should start their day knowing about *Amorphophallus titanicum*, there are many other notable horticultural stories that get less press. Gypsy moths and emerald ash borers sometimes merit a feature as they destroy our woodlands, but such killers as verticillium wilt, Swede midge, and spotted-wing fruit flies remain unknown to the public. And even I, who strive to be in the know, learned some lessons this week when a landscape contractor sent me photos of dying spiraea.

If you can't quite picture what exactly a spiraea is, you are forgiven, and to add to the confusion, the word is often also spelled "spirea." The bridalwreath spiraea, a tall deciduous shrub with abundant but tiny white flowers in late spring, was popular in Victorian times and still grows in older neighborhoods. Most would say, however, that spiraeas in general were bit players and never the stars of a garden. Then, about twenty years ago, many new, smaller types of spiraea featuring colorful foliage or flowers, were developed. Prized for their site adaptability and low maintenance, they were installed by the millions in new housing developments, strip malls and roundabouts. I call them "gas station plants" and in such harsh environs they appear with other tough customers like Stella de Oro daylilies, barberries and arborvitae.

So when the contractor sent photos of spiraeas showing smaller than normal leaves and dead branches, I wasn't immediately sure of the cause. A little digging revealed several scholarly papers concerning a disease called "spiraea stunt" caused by an organism called a phytoplasma. These bacteria-like creatures are transmitted by insects to plants, where they infest the phloem, causing yellowing foliage, stunted, dense growth and gradual decline. Sometimes called "yellows" diseases because of their foliar impact, the proliferation of compact shoot growth is often termed a "witches'-broom." Normally a serious and sober lot, these colorful terms for a plant in distress clearly indicate that even plant pathologists have a playful side.

What are the chances that the local spiraeas in distress had this obscure malady? I contacted one of my favorite Cornell scientists, and a plant pathologist with an excellent sense of humor, Margery Daughtrey. Margery is the plant disease expert at the Long Island Horticultural Research Institute and keeps tabs on plant problems not just in New York State but across the country. She's seeing similarly suffering spiraeas on the Long Island and in the Hudson Valley, and has confirmed the presence of the phytoplasma using laboratory testing. The test is expensive – in the range of \$100 – and, as Margery says, most gardeners don't want to spend money just to get bad news. Commercial nursery growers, however, will want to know if their plants are infected with stunt phytoplasma before they propagate or sell them. Plants suffering from the malady should be removed from the landscape, since they will not recover and there is no remedy.



## Some Musings On Edible Landscaping

With so many people stuck at home for well over a year, I have very pleasantly observed a renewed interest in gardening amongst the general population. The garden centers are buzzing with people happily loading up their carts with plants and other gardening essentials. I find this to be a wonderful outcome to the health crises we endured. Even the darkest situation can have its silver lining. I bet if you asked any of them if they were a vegetable gardener or a flower gardener, they would say one or the other, or they might even tell you both, but they would not mean both together (in one garden).

In many minds, gardening is divided into two main categories. There is landscaping, or flower gardening, and then there is vegetable gardening. The vegetable garden is usually out back somewhere sight-unseen, with regimented rows of edibles, if there even is one at all. This divide clearly delineates that there are plants grown for beauty and then there are plants grown for food, and never the twain shall meet.

To this I say poppycock! A beautiful plant is a beautiful plant, whether you can eat it or not. And if you can eat it then you just got an added bonus to your gardening efforts. Vegetables are not ugly. In fact, some of them are quite stunningly gorgeous. They deserve to be admired for their beauty as well as their deliciousness and nutrition.

Some folks, who will readily grow plants around the foundation of their home and maybe an additional flower garden or two, say that they don't have the time, or money, or space for a vegetable garden. Au contraire! If you have the room for any plants at all, and you are putting the effort in to maintain them and keep them alive and happy, then you can quite easily grow at least a few vegetables, herbs, or fruits.



Tricolor sage and lemon thyme are two charming edible additions to our bed at the Farm and Home Center.



A gorgeous purple cabbage graces our Ornaments & Edibles bed

Almost a decade ago, when our team of Magical Gardeners (AKA Master Gardener Volunteers) took over the planting of one of the gardens in the front of the Farm and Home Center (Cornell Cooperative Extension's office in Millbrook, NY) as part of the Sustainable Demonstration Gardens, we made a strong commitment that as part of our education to the public we would always grow something edible in our garden to show people just how easy and beautiful it can be to grow food, even without a vegetable garden. And we have been faithful to this promise throughout our years together.





A Scarlett runner bean flower on our trellis.



Poppies frolic happily with baby cabbages in my home garden.



Cherry tomatoes arch over the garden path.



Some of the magical gardener team after our most recent garden work session.

In fact, when we renamed the demonstration gardens recently (from the boring “location” names we had originally used, ours was “Middle Lower”) to names that reflected more of what our gardens were all about, we renamed ours the “Ornamentals & Edibles Garden”.

We have gotten many compliments on our garden throughout the years and never has anyone ever commented that it looked like a vegetable garden. In fact, I don’t think most people even notice how many edible plants we have packed into our beautiful space.

There are so many lovely features that edible plants have to offer in an esthetic design. Some offer lovely leaf color and texture. These include many lettuces, kale, parsley, oregano, basil, swiss chard, and cabbages. Others offer pretty flowers, such as many beans, peas, and herbs, like chives and lavender. The huge flowers of squash family plants can be quite dramatic in an ornamental setting as well. Even the actual vegetables themselves offer beauty in addition to nutrition. We have grown adorable, tiny orange “Tangerine Dream” peppers in our O&E bed, and multicolored cherry tomatoes have graced our archway as well.

Not only are the plants we grow for food also beautiful to look at but conversely many of the plants we grow as flowers are edible as well. Some of these may include nasturtiums, violets, pansies, lavender, marigolds, carnations, chrysanthemums, and bee balm. And, of course, fruit trees in your landscape, such as apple, cherry, and pear, can be just as beautiful as ornamentals, with their delightful spring riot of blossoms. We have a simply magnificent elderberry bush in front of the Farm and Home Center that is a show stopper for its delicate lacy purple leaves, as well as its spring blossoms and the lush fruit that adorn its graceful branches in the summertime.

So, I say let’s put an end to this silly divide between plants grown for beauty and plants grown for food. They can be one and the same. Every plant is beautiful in its own way, and some are delicious and nutritious as well. Let them all happily blend together and the world will be a better place.

**Text and photos by Dutchess County Master Gardener Victoria Rolfe.**  
**This article was re-printed with permission from the “Dutchess Dirt” newsletter**

# Let It Be



“Just sit back and watch it grow!” was a favorite line proclaimed by radio talk-show personality Ralph Snodsmith after he dispensed gardening advice to a caller. The onetime horticultural guru of New York’s WOR-AM, Ralph knew that most plants want to grow if we gardeners just give them the right conditions and care. But sometimes, a plant will take its own sweet time deciding if it is going to live or make a one-way journey to the compost pile instead. This has been my experience with a species called *Acanthus spinosus*, a.k.a. bear’s breech.

Hailing from the Mediterranean, *Acanthus spinosus* has much to recommend it as a garden plant. Growing in a large clump, the attractive, dark green, glossy foliage is deeply cut, thistle-like, and only modestly barbed. It is resistant to insect pests and rabbits. Spikes of snapdragon-like flowers in shades of pale and dusky pink are distinctive and rise to three feet or more above the leaves. The ancient Greek architect Callimachus was a fan of this plant, decorating the top of his Corinthian columns with *Acanthus* leaves, and it still a common design element in contemporary art and design. Often commonly called “bear’s breeches,” the plant has nothing to do with

the slacks Smoky wears or we wish Yogi would put on, but derives from the bear claw-like flower bracts. Other common names are oyster plant, sea holly and bear’s foot. Such a historic plant with a dignified demeanor certainly should have a loftier moniker.

Having seen *Acanthus* species thriving in warm southern climes, I was surprised to see it living large in Ithaca, New York, as well. At the time, I had assumed that we were too far north to grow it successfully, but if they could grow it in Ithaca, well by golly, it should grow in Castleton-on-Hudson, too. So I procured a plant, set it into my nice loamy soil in a backyard spot, and sat back to watch it grow, letting Ralph be my guide.

That was twenty years ago. For at least fifteen ensuing summers, the *Acanthus* would produce just a modest leaf or two, never more. It didn’t look sick, but refused to thrive. I kept the weeds and neighboring perennials at bay, and watered it occasionally, but the status quo was maintained. For perhaps a decade I hardly gave it a thought, but I let it be.

In 2016, the *Acanthus* woke up, becoming fuller and downright lush. I’m not sure what sparked the change: the mediocre Batman movie, Brexit, presidential politics? Perhaps that difficult year inspired it to adopt a “now or never” attitude in terms of its own survival. In 2017, it produced its first flower spike, and this year it sports a half-dozen more, finally making something to see. I can finally say “I grow *Acanthus spinosus*” and not be ashamed of my results.

I’m glad I let this late-bloomer do its thing, get it’s groove on and finally rise up singing. The *Acanthus* has taught me patience.



**By David Chinery**



## A Brush With Greatness

Sometimes the worst garden disasters create happy endings. This was the case for our Norway spruce. A towering giant, it was hit by lightning in July 2015, giving it a fatal trunk crack from top to bottom. While I was glad the tree took the jolt rather than the house, its removal left an ugly blank patch which quickly started to fill with weeds. Faster than an American Pickers guest star at a tag sale, I started acquiring and installing new plants, including two winterberry hollies, a spicebush, a moosewood maple, and best of all, a bottlebrush buckeye.

If you look in your woods for bottlebrush buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*) and don't find it, please forgive me. I admit that calling it native is a bit of stretch, since the most extensive natural populations are found in central Alabama, with nary a sprig in New York. But get to know this outstanding woody ornamental, and you'll be hooked, too. The Morton Arboretum calls it a handsome shrub with memorable flowers, while British botanist William Jackson Bean wrote "no better plant could be recommended as a lawn shrub" and Wayside Gardens proclaims it "one of the best flowering shrubs for the summer." While I freely admit that Wayside doesn't go in for understatement regarding anything they sell, for an Englishman to give high praise to an American plant, it has to be good.

So, let me tell you why bottlebrush buckeye is a plant of special merit. First, it has great foliage and form. Its medium green leaves are palmately compound, giving it a unique texture, and it develops into a dense mound ten to twelve feet high and at least as wide. Unless you want to block the view out your first-floor windows, don't plant one near your house. Instead, locate it on the margin between lawn and woodland, where it excels. Bottlebrush might also be grown as a small tree, but the plant's spreading nature would then require management, which seems a shame. Better to plant it someplace where you can let it branch to the ground and spread a bit. As garden writer Margaret Roach keystroked, "Give it plenty of room—and I mean plenty—and it will make a beloved companion for decades to come."

Plantsman Michael Dirr wrote "there are few summer flowering plants which can rival this species." The delicate white flowers are borne in cylindrical panicles up to 18 inches tall, dozens of which will appear on a mature plant in late July. Although the name "bottlebrush" sounds a bit prosaic, it aptly describes the form of this floral display. The buckeye fruits, which are light brown nuts inside pear-shaped capsules, aren't prolifically produced here in the north. Bottlebrush buckeye rarely needs pruning, unless planted too close to the house. Southern Living's Steve Bender sums up by stating: "People often expect the prettiest plants to be a pain to grow, but that certainly isn't the case here. Bottlebrush buckeye needs moist, well-drained soil and partial to full shade. That's it."



Text and photos by David Chinery



# Green Shots: The Gardening World in Pictures



## The 9/11

### Memorial Park,

started in 2011, is owned by the City of Troy. It is located north-east of the 112th Street Bridge on First Avenue in the city's Lansingburgh neighborhood, and overlooks the scenic Hudson River. Master Gardeners have been involved with beautifying the park for the last ten years, and are currently in charge of the landscape design and maintenance. Knockout roses surround the Memorial, and daylilies line the walkways. Plantings at the river overlook are kept low to preserve the view. A mixed border perennial garden featuring a wide variety of plants, including redbuds, hydrangeas, coneflowers and ornamental grasses forms the north border and is the main horticultural feature. Local community members work with Master Gardeners in maintaining this urban gem.





# Savoring Sumac

Hydrangeas are in, yews are out. Interest in vegetable gardening swings with the tides of economics and pandemics. In the hippest neighborhoods, spider plants in macrame hangers have even made a comeback. Public opinion on native plants is on

the way up, too. In my collegiate plant identification classes, our professor would say “it’s just a native,” somewhat disparagingly, when we looked at an eastern red cedar or tuliptree. Today, those on the front of one of the trendiest gardening curves are going native and banning non-indigenous plants entirely, or are trying to plant gardens which are composed largely of native plants.

Some natives, such as bottlebrush buckeye and the sugar maple, are attractive and easy to invite into your personal landscape. Others, like poison ivy, would only be employed in the garden of a sadist. I’m interested in the plants which people deem in-betweeners, such as sumac. In England years ago, I was approached by a nicely dressed gentleman, who guessed I was an American. “Our favorite plant comes from your country,” he said. I guessed it must be the giant redwood, a certain hybrid tea rose, or perhaps a rare orchid. “No,” he replied, “it is sumac. It has the most magnificent fall color and beautiful fruit!” Our new love of natives hasn’t discovered sumac yet, so I’m here to promote its case.

Locally, sumac species such as staghorn (*Rhus typhina*) and smooth (*Rhus glabra*) grow wild in hedgerows, right-of-ways, and abandoned fields. This “wildness” may be part of the discord, since sumac defies pruning into meatballs or hockey pucks and will always look shaggy and primordial. Sumac supporters point to cultivars with dissected, lacey foliage that is prettier than the common types, such as *Rhus typhina* ‘Dissecta’ or ‘Laciniata,’ both with finely cut leaves. I’ve had ‘Laciniata’ in my garden for decades, and found it not wildly rampant from seed or sprouts. While it has moved fifteen feet from its planting spot, seeking more sun, the very few unwanted runners have been easy to remove.

“But it is poisonous!” the sumac-phobes will proclaim. Nonsense. These sumacs are fine to touch. In fact, poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*) grows primarily in bogs, has white (not red) berries, is closely related to poison ivy, and is not common locally. Once again, the name is the problem, not the plant. Perhaps sumac needs a new image and a re-boot, a process which succeeds with some politicians and certain consumer brands.

Sumac is useful, too. Legendary Master Gardener Winnie Lustenader, an edible wild plant aficionado, offered up a truly delicious lemonade made from sumac berries. Sumac fruits also make excellent fuel for a beekeeper’s smoker, the device used to calm honeybees while the prodding around in their hive.

In closing, I must quote the famous plantsman Michael Dirr, who opined in his *Manual Of Woody Landscape Plants*, “Europeans have long appreciated *Rhus glabra* and *Rhus typhina*. Perhaps, someday, Americans will become more introspective and appreciative of our rich woody plant heritage.”



Text and photo by David Chinery



***“Today the art of gardening is practiced much more often than any other, in ignorant, impulsive ways, by people who never stop to think that it is an art at all.”***

M.G. Van Rensselaer (American author and architecture critic, 1851-1934)



**Gardening Questions?**

**Call The Master Gardeners!**



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