

12 March Garden Column Planting Ornamentals for Eating?

We all know vegetable gardens are beautiful but perhaps your neighborhood is not so up-to-date as to expect to see rhubarb among the pansies and pole beans punctuating the rose bed? The “why not” discussion is for another time. Plants, indeed, can be handsome ornamentals and still furnish an occasional small ‘crop’. Once I had large pots of blueberries near the front steps. In the afternoon they were shaded by the house so did not benefit from full sun but there were berries to share with the birds. Actually the birds shared with me, minimally.

Traditional blueberries have been crossed with lower growing varieties so that a small hedge or foundation planting can also provide flowers, fruit and fall color. Two cultivars especially bred for their disease resistance and ornamental value are ‘Sunshine Blue’ and ‘Powder Blue’. These smaller size plants are a boon for those gardeners wishing to put a winter’s supply of berries into their freezers as the shrubs can be protected by netting more easily. I gave up on the netting idea when a small bird was caught in it. The solution is to plant enough for everyone.

Another topper for breakfast cereal is the Juneberry. They grow on a small ornamental tree loved for its early spring white blossoms and deep purple berries. The proper name is Amelanchier but depending on where you live this native is called Shadblow, Saskatoon, Serviceberry, or Sarvisberry. The Shadblow seems especially fitting as the blooms do ‘blow’ too soon and appear and disappear when shad move upstream. Newer varieties have larger blooms and berries and the branching of the tree makes collecting the berries easy even though many of them are only available to creatures with wings.

Several years ago there was a rash of ornamental pear trees appearing everywhere. They were briefly beautiful in spring and had a neat outline and lovely fall color. However they split, blew down, and were generally short-lived: and they produced no fruit, fruit that does seem to be the reason to have a pear tree in the first place. Why not plant a seckel pear tree as an ornamental and have the bounty of sweet, crispy small pears? This pear, *Pyrus communis*, is easy to grow and has an open rounded shape. Most varieties grow about eight or ten feet tall and it is both self-pollinating and can also pollinate other pears.

A family member has planted an Asian pear, *Pyrus pyrifolia* and it is too soon to vouch for its value as an ornamental. The catalogs do attest to the ornamental qualities, claiming their shape, small size, bloom, and leaves make them a handsome addition to the landscape. They should be planted near another pear of any species as they are semi self-fertile.

Environmental update: After the winter storms this country has faced there is a growing consensus that yes, climate is changing, and yes, perhaps we should pay attention. China, where air pollution became so critical a problem that the rich were leaving and the poor dying changed their coal policy. Rather than importing and using so much of their own coal, they are advancing alternative energy sources. What China does, you may think, doesn’t really matter to us so it is none of our business? It matters because of its size, large population, and increasing economic power. Additionally, the wind carrying pollutants circles the globe, the borderless globe.

More good news is that in the US, the #2 coal user next to China, coal use dropped 18% from 2007 to 2013. Part of the decrease can be attributed to the increasing availability of natural gas. However the use of hazardous fracking techniques to obtain trapped oil and gas out of shale rock formations has made its long-term use untenable. Also a negative is the extensive leakage of

methane from wells, pipelines, and tanks and methane is an even more potent greenhouse gas than CO₂.

In China currently electricity generated from wind farms has surpassed the power generated from nuclear power plants. Another interesting facet of China's awareness of the necessity of changing from a fossil fuel based economy to a sustainable one is the presence of roof top solar water heaters for 170 million Chinese households.

Europe, too, offers a case study for the future of sustainable energy. A study done last year in Denmark projected that with the windfarms there coming on line in 2016, the costs of electricity produced by wind will undercut the cost to 50% of that produced by new coal and natural gas plants. As that projection plays out, the market will follow.