

Sorting Out the Nomenclature

Perhaps a rose is a rose by any other name, but generally sorting out plant names can lead to a circular conversation that often ends where it began – in total confusion. For example, two trees have orange in their names but neither is a real orange, *Citrus sinensis*. Hardy Orange or Trifoliolate Orange is *Poncirus trifoliata*, a large shrub or small tree, 10 to 15 feet tall and spreading with dark green trifoliolate leaves, fragrant white flowers in spring, and later, fruits the size of a ping-pong ball ripening to orange. It has astonishing rigid green shoots with sharp spines. It is pretty both in flower and in fruit with its bright ‘oranges’ and a hedge of them might make a splendid deer fence.

The other non-orange is Osage orange, *Maclura pomifera*, a medium sized thorny tree. Another common name for *Maclura* is hedge apple. Thorny enough for a fence it has puckery green fruits. One species, *M. tricuspidata*, a shrub or small tree, does have edible orange-red fruit. While Osage orange is native to south central US, the edible one is Asian. Both of these ‘orange’ trees would have kept animals either in or out before the invention of barbed wire fencing.

Plant names have a way of falling into the wrong slots when you tuck them into your memory making them hard to retrieve on demand. Last week someone asked me the name of the trailing purple leaved plant with the small pink flower and I said ‘*Tradescantia*’ and felt rather stupid because I had never heard it called anything else. And when I looked it up I found it is *T. pallida* ‘*Purpuria*’ but still no common name was given.

It is native to Mexico, a distant relative of our native *Tradescantia virginiana*, the familiar spiderwort although how it reflects spiders I don’t know. The Audubon wildflower guide says that it is so named because the angular leaf arrangement suggests a squatting spider. Maybe so, but not a comfortably sized spider as the leaves are very long. However, when the flower opens in the morning “each hair on the stamens ...consists of a chain of thin-walled cells; the hairs are a favorite subject for microscopic examination in biology classes because the flowing cytoplasm and nucleus can be seen easily.”

Our spiderwort was one of the plants gathered from the Virginia colony and sent to England to John Tradescant (1570-1638) English botanist and horticulturist. He was the earliest known collector of plants and other natural history specimens in England.

The *T. pallida* ‘*Purpurea*’ being Mexican does not winter over here so is treated as an annual although it is perennial in frost-free areas. There are several species that have striped or variegated leaves and make attractive houseplants.

A plant with several common names is *Datura stramonium* or moonflower, jimson weed, devil’s trumpet and Jamestown weed. ‘Jimson’ is said to be a corruption of Jamestown? Among other legends is the story of the British soldiers who were sent to placate rebellious Jamestown settlers in 1677 and were treated to *Datura* leaves in their food. They went “loco” for 11 days giving the Jamestown colonists the upper hand. Not just the leaves are dangerous; the highly toxic seeds contain tropane alkaloids that can cause seizures and hallucinations.

ATTENTION PESTO COOKS:

If you do not have a handy supply of basil, you can kill two birds with one stone and concoct pesto from an invasive pest, garlic mustard. This pest was introduced in 1868 from Europe by good cooks unwilling to live without it and like so many things that are innocently transplanted, became a horror, crowded out native plants that serve a purpose in the ecology of an area without itself having anything to contribute. You still find pictures of it in wildflower manuals as it has a rounded cluster of white flowers that resemble the flowers on watercress and the leaves are heart-shaped, a charming small plant. The leaves smell like garlic when crushed so it is easy to identify. It belongs to the mustard family, the Brassicaceae, like cabbage and broccoli and their kin.

In many areas of the country teams have worked to remove it and, to spur enthusiasm, last April the Richmond Land Trust in Vermont passed out recipes! Not only in Vermont, but in Michigan, the Kalamazoo Nature Center published “Garlic Mustard: from Pest to Pesto”. What makes me uneasy is that some cook may like it too well and instead of pulling it out, leave a bit to seed for another year.

Eating dandelions is good: they are delicious but some people consider them weeds. They are not much of a threat to the environment; they just bother people when they pop up on front lawns, screaming yellow amid all that lovely green.