

How Rare Is A June Day ?

This June has been preceded by a May that was not “rare” but “wee done” and gardens and gardeners both are sagging from the heat. When James Russell Lowell (1819-91) wrote “what is so rare as a day in June” ‘Then, if ever, come perfect days’ he was not living in the here and now. Lowell is out of favor as a poet with lines that battered language into “peasant” speech such as these 4th of July words:

“We’ve a war, an’ a debt an’ a flag; an’ ‘f this Aint to be independunt, why, wut and airth is?’

Teachers have work enough with student spelling without having poet, editor, diplomat, critic Lowell undermine their effort.

Since weather is one of the things we can do little about we can search for the positives of having a six-month summer. Eating out of one’s own garden must surely top the list. Gardeners pass along more than cuttings, seeds and such. They also keep one another informed about gardening books that are fun to read. A Friend lent me Richard Goodman’s “French Dirt” (2002 Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill).

This charming story of a garden in the south of France is not only about the author’s intensely ‘farmed’ patch of tough clay 30x40 feet but also about a year living in a village as a foreigner and the slow growth of friendships that bridge the expected collection of differences. Gardeners will delight in being reminded of the passion for growing vegetables they share with Mr. Goodman. His garden was partly a success. It was a lot failure but only as product never as experience.

Growing things to eat is such a basically human instinct and in our fast-paced era, a humanizing one. I remember the Greek myth about the god who could only be bested if he was suspended off the earth since contact with the ground was the source of his strength. I can’t recall his name, can you? He was an archetype for all of us.

CABBAGES AND KINGS

It isn’t often that we who have one eye on any scrap of information relating to plants are caught unaware by a new thing! An article on Vireya Rhododendrons introduced me to an old plant new to me. They were discovered in the South Pacific in 1843 and after being introduced to a British nursery, more than 500 hybrids were developed over the following decades. Interest in them mushroomed after WWII.

What has provoked discussion currently is not just their brilliant colors—all of the usual plus yellows and oranges—but their habit of blooming several times a year, some almost constantly. As epiphytes, they can grow in their native habitat on high moss-covered tree limbs. For gardeners in frost-free places, they can be grown in raised beds.

Anyone with space inside can grow them as easily as orchids, which have similar cultural requirements: lean feeding, soil-less growing medium and avoidance of over-watering.

According to the AHS A-Z Encyclopedia, rhododendrons are often divided into five main groups: large-leaf evergreen ones, small leaf evergreen ones, Vireya rhododendrons, deciduous azaleas, and evergreen azaleas. The encyclopedia gives Malesian as another name for the Vireya saying they are epiphytic shrubs from tropical areas of Southeast Asia and frost tender. *R. jasminiflorum* and *R. laetum* are two Vireya which may appear in catalogs. The first is a 3-foot, rather untidy plant with lovely pink to white fragrant flowers. The second is erect and yellow with glossy dark green leaves. Both are tropical and can be kept small by pruning to make them agreeable house pets.

The Bovees Nursery in Portland, Ore. has an extensive collection (www.bovees.com). For the details on these old/new plants, another website is www.Virey.net

*As I write the Japanese beetles have yet to arrive, but when they do, dunk them quickly into a detergent bath. They move moiré slowly early morning and late evening. If you wish to use those dangling yellow traps, keep them away from the shrubs, you want to protect. The beetles may decide to have a fin last meal before they die.

*A cuke tip: Cucumbers don't improve hanging on the vine. Pick them young and to keep the vine producing, pick them often. Virginia Tech says they can be stored up to two weeks at 45-50 degrees. Lower temperatures cause chilling damage and higher ones encourage yellowing, which can also be seen if they are stored with tomatoes or apples

*Hard as it is to sacrifice the few for the many, keep thinning hour peaches to 4-6 inches apart for maximum quality and size.