

The Writings of Eloise Butler



The attractiveness of vegetables and common weeds, Part 1 - 1911

I sometimes think, if I have any mission in this world, it is to teach the decorative value of common weeds. A weed is simply a plant out of place; or as Emerson says, "A plant whose virtues are not yet understood." I amuse myself in summer by decorating the home with what are generally considered ugly weeds, often to be greeted with the exclamations -- "What a beautiful thing! Where did you get it, and what do you call it?" "Mullein," I may answer, or "sheep sorrel," as the case may be, "which you well know." "Of course I do, but I never really saw it before." A sympathetic interest in nature is a never failing source of delight... When in Massachusetts I never miss an opportunity to see Mr. C. W. Parker's place at Marblehead Neck. Mr. Parker is a wealthy Bostonian, a prominent member of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, and an enthusiast in regard to our native plants. He left his grounds facing the sea in their natural ruggedness -- a refreshing contrast to some of the neighboring estates, whose owners have failed to improve upon nature with their artificial walls of masonry.

The rare plants from abroad do not stand out obtrusively, but blend with the landscape, every plant appearing to belong in the place it occupies. The haunting graces of wild life are retained; no pruning is done except on fruit trees, and the meadow is left un-mown, that one may enjoy the seldom appreciated flowers and fruits of the grasses and sedges. Despised weeds are raised to the dignity of cultivated plants and rise un-cropped from the well-kept turf, in thriving luxuriance, as the mullein, the evening primrose, and the Indian poke, to demonstrate the truth that nature makes nothing un-beautiful...



On the borders of copses, a graceful composite, *Prenanthes alba* [photo left], may still be seen. One notices the broad, halberd-shaped leaves long before the flowering time and wonders what sort of plant it is. And later on is sure to mark the pendant bells of the flower heads with their delicate, mauve-colored bracts enclosing whitish petals. A closely allied species has local repute in South Carolina and elsewhere as a remedy for snakebites, so the genus is known as rattlesnake root. This "gall-of-the-earth" has subterranean tubers that are bitter enough to counteract any virulence, if, as was once believed, the more ill tasting the medicine, the more potent it is to cure. The flowers go to seed like the dandelion, but the parachute of fine hairs that wafts the seed abroad is tawny brown instead of white.

Dock is synonymous with backache to the gardener, who unearths the long tap root again and again; for it is difficult to remove in entirety, and the usual result of his efforts are more vigorous growth and a multiplication of progeny. To use the leaves for greens is his only compensation. The flowers of the docks are a dull greenish yellow; but many achieve beauty in the myriad [of] small, flattish, triangular and slightly winged fruits

in all shades of red, yellow, and brown. You will sing "Rule Britannia!" to see an arrangement of tall swamp dock (*Rumex britannica*) in an appropriate vase. Every weed has decorative possibilities, and can be used when hot-house or garden flowers are lacking. Life will be richer by the discovery of beauty that we have hitherto passed unheeding. Attractive bouquets can be made even from the common sheep sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*) that earlier in the season clothed sandy hillsides with its low, spiry inflorescence of red and yellow. The plant is a naturalized weed, originally from Europe. Children know the acid leaves as "sauer kraut." They can be used for salad. A form similar to sheep sorrel is cultivated in France for this purpose.

The large, coarse, basal leaves of the weed burdock [photo right], novices are apt to mistake for "pie-plant." A taste of the leaf would convince them that this disagreeable composite is no relation to the acid rhubarb which is allied to the burless docks, just mentioned. The burdock is a naturalized biennial from the old world. The seeds that sprout this season form the big leaves. Next year a large, bush-like plant will develop, crowned with pink heads surrounded with row upon row of barbed grappling hooks. We can admire the symmetry of the rank growth and rejoice with the little girls who furnish their doll houses with elegant sofas, chairs, and bureaus made of the burs; but before the seeds mature, the plant should be uprooted and burned to protect dogs and cattle from the discomforts of stinging prickles and matted fur, not to speak of the mortification of people, who fine themselves the "observed of all observers" on returning from an autumn walk, festooned and kilted by these "sticktight's."



.....A pink flowered variety of yarrow [photo left ©Ivar Leidus] is a favorite in cultivated gardens. A botanist from this country (exploring Jamaica, where what are to us rare and costly exotics grow wild by the roadside, free to any one who cares to gather them), was entertained by a wealthy planter. His hostess took much pride in her garden. What she cared for most of all and pointed out as curiosities were a few common northern plants, among them a lone, lorn, scraggly specimen of potted yarrow. In his surprise he exclaimed, "Oh, you cultivate our weeds and we cultivate yours!" Thus the unusual and foreign, even if inferior, is by the majority, preferred. We may esteem the yarrow for its steadfastness. In the middle of last November, when the surrounding vegetation was limp and blackened by frost, it was in full blossom. Any flower appeals to us when it blooms on the verge of ice-bound winter.

NOTES:

A shorter continuation to this essay was written in 1931.

The Wild Botanic Garden in Wirth Park, became the "Native Plant Reserve" and was then renamed the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden in 1929.

The text of this article is one of a number of short essays that Eloise Butler wrote while curator of the Garden that after her death were collected in a series titled *Annals of the Wild Life Reserve*, but most were never published. The text of the first and last section indicates however, that this essay was sent to the Gray Memorial Botanical Chapter, division D, of the Agassiz Association for their circular bulletin. Eloise was a member of Division D (the middle west) from 1908 until her death. Those bulletins were circulated among members by postal round-robin circulation. The Agassiz Association was founded in the late 1800's to be an association of local chapters that would combine the like interests of individuals and organizations in the study of nature but after 1901 was largely defunct and only the Gray Memorial Botanical Chapter, with its several divisions, was still active and remained so until 1943. A shorter continuation piece on the same topic was written in 1931.

Photo of Eloise Butler, ca. 1920, at top of first page courtesy Minneapolis Public Library. The other photos are ©G D Bebeau or as noted.