

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

A land of nonnatives

BY SIOUX ROGERS

Likening nonnative, invasive, noxious, and nuisance plants to humankind is not a fanciful leap. Surely without too much mind stretching, you can think of people you know or have known who fit into at least one of these plant categories. Right? Note that the term “alien” is not in the list. Aliens are from Mars.

Let’s look at “nonnative.” “Native” is defined by geography. A plant species may be native in the Applegate Valley but a foreigner in a southwest desert. Actually, according to the US Department of Agriculture, “Only plants found in this country before European settlement are considered to be native to the United States.” Don’t assume that because a plant is nonnative, it is harmful or invasive. Most nonnative plants have been introduced with the help of a human being.

“Naturalized” and its sub-category “invasive” are not to be confused. “Naturalized” refers to a nonnative plant that will spread and have offspring over time and usually is loved and wanted. Did you know that daffodils, which bloom all over the Applegate Valley in spring, originated in Spain, Portugal, North Africa, and West Asia? Is this nonnative plant loved or what?

Think of “invasive, noxious, and opportunistic” as a single group. Whether “born” here or coming from afar, plants in this category may be a threat to the local ecology, may reproduce too fast for the space, or may displace native species. Basically, the entire category

simply refers to the unwanted, for whatever reason it might be unwanted. Given another time and place, all serve a purpose.

Most of what we grow to eat came from somewhere other than the US. (Go to nau.edu/lrm22/lessons/plant_origins/plant_origins.html for information about the origins of cultivated fruits and vegetables, or just google “nau plant origins.”) Here are some nonnative plants that have enriched our lives for hundreds of years.

- Carrots probably originated in Persia from a wild species cultivated for its leaves and seeds.
- Tomatoes were first cultivated by the Aztecs and Incas as early as 700 AD.
- Wheat came from what is today southeastern Turkey.
- Corn, or maize, was first grown in Mexico’s Tehuacan Valley according to most historians.

Our Sunday chicken was originally from southeast Asia. Well, of course, it was not cooked; my grandma did that.

Even our honeybees did not grow up here but are native to Eurasia. From there



Nonnative daffodils flourish in the author’s garden and all over the Applegate Valley.

human travelers spread them to four other continents. We love our bees, but they love and need the “dreaded” (not by me) dandelion as a spring source of nectar and pollen.

The dandelion originated in Eurasia and is considered a successful weed. Though the dandelion is vilified by many people, it does have many health benefits. “It has been used in traditional Chinese healing for breast concerns,

appendicitis, and stomach problems. Native Americans boil and drink dandelion extract to help treat digestion problems, skin ailments, inflammation, liver injury, kidney disease, and heartburn. Early Europeans used it to remedy diabetes, high fever, and diarrhea.

“Dandelion is a very rich source of beta-carotene, which we convert into vitamin A. This flowering plant is also rich in vitamin C, fiber, potassium, iron, calcium, magnesium, zinc, and phosphorus. It’s a good place to get B complex vitamins, trace minerals, organic sodium, and even some vitamin D too.

“Dandelion also contains protein, more than spinach” (sunwarrior.com/blogs/health-hub/11-health-benefits-of-dandelion-leaves-and-dandelion-root).

Craig D. Lounsborough, a certified professional life coach, sees a lesson of acceptance in the dandelion. “If you see a dandelion as a weed,” he says, “you’ll spray it. If you see it as a flower, you’ll draw it close, turn it this way and that, and become lost in the colossal burst of slender golden petals that spew sunshine into the darkest of souls. And so, how many things have we sprayed that could have illuminated our souls if we would have let them be more than what we let them be?”

Dirty Fingernails and all,
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