

Food for Thought

By Schann Nelson
OSU Master Gardener



Tomorrow is the vernal equinox. Hard to believe that the hours between sunrise and sunset are equal to the hours between sunset and sunrise, but true. Under our cloud ceiling, which can seem to hug the ground so intensely that it is difficult to distinguish the air from the rain, the days are long and dark indeed. Welcome to the temperate cloud forest!

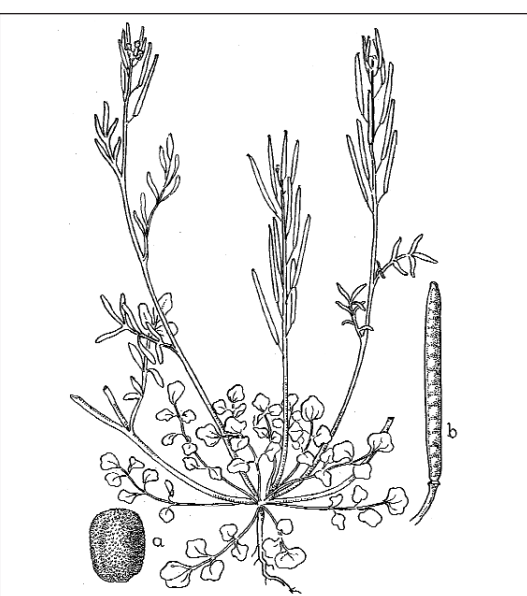
Thankfully, even in the most urban areas of our state, one can see and feel the rich interconnected web of life, the surrounding and supporting environment. Open spaces and wetlands have been preserved to support native and migratory animals. Invasive non-native plants are being identified and sometimes controlled. It seems appropriate to contemplate and celebrate the determination to preserve this little corner of the earth in this sesquicentennial year.

Our piece of earth, trade center and inspiration for millennia, continues to support an ecosystem that could continue for millennia to come. Rural communities across the state have learned to survive with the land over generations. Family farms and forests, as well as native communities, provide a practical wealth of understanding about living with the land. By sustaining these communities and continuing to protect fragile habitats, Oregon supports a number of culturally rich, diverse urban communities alongside some of the most primitive and spectacular natural features in the world. Oregon may have more defined, relatively intact habitats than any other state. Anyone can drive in a single day from the Pacific Ocean, over the coastal cloud forest, across the broad fertile valley, up across the range of volcanoes into the high desert *OR* up the Gorge, over a pass and into real mountains. Across the state, rural towns, like ours, continue to support access to and understanding of our own state treasure of remote areas, where the impact of mankind is not overwhelming.

Here in the cloud forest it's still COLD and WET! The flowers beginning to appear are not delicate – many of the early spring bulbs positively laugh at snow! When night falls or the weather is dark and wet, Crocus, Tulip, Daffodil bow their heads, tighten their petals and go to sleep. Trust that the sun will appear again, and when it does, our lovely spring flowers will burst forth in all their glory. Even now, Hellebore is scarcely interrupted by the chilliest dampness, while violets, hardy geraniums and the tougher sedums and sempervivans have never completely stopped doing their thing.

I was pretty discouraged last month by the economics of growing your own food. Of course it's not really about economics, though that continues to gain appeal, it's about joy. Certainly eating food you grow or gather is joyful in the eating. It's a bit harder for me to get to the joy of the work involved in planting, harvesting and (especially) preserving, but I do enjoy the quick hunt for a fresh herb. Bitter winter cress is starting to pop up, so I was successful last week for the first time this season. These little guys are quite good, crunchy and slightly bitter, if you can get to them before they send up the bloom stalks.

I've finally figured out how to harvest wild cress efficiently enough to accent a pizza or salad. I wiggle my (gloved) finger under the base of the rosette of leaves and pull the whole thing up with my left (non-dominant) hand. Before letting go, I clip off the roots and dirt with a pair of scissors, then drop the leaflets into a strainer. After a quick rinse, I spread them on a towel and pick out any remaining dirt



The leaves of this cress form tight, ground-hugging rosettes before sending up bloom stalks. Illustration shows plant after blooms have gone to seed.

or dead leaves or wayward guests. Yummy fresh greenness!

One fun project: Try sweet peas or nasturtiums in a hanging basket! Begin with a good quality potting soil. Pour or scoop enough to fill your pot into something you can mix in. Add a scant teaspoon of dry gel-crystals and a tablespoon of slow release fertilizer designed for flower production, for every 10-inch basket. Mix your amendments in thoroughly, fill the basket and press soil down firmly. Press only 4 or 5 sweet peas or a trio of nasturtium seed into each basket. These seeds are large enough for small fingers to handle – a basket or two should be growing well by Mother's Day. Last summer I learned NOT to put sweet peas and nasturtiums in the same pot. They have very different requirements for sun and water. I also learned to greatly reduce the number of seeds per pot!

Notes:

I wear nitrile gloves in an attempt to keep a bit of moisture and prevent the broken nails and skin that otherwise result with my dry old skin.

Be sure that no chemicals have been used if you are harvesting from a 'lawn'.

ALWAYS get permission to hunt or gather from landowners.

I once grew a couple of 'Italian Salad' type dandelions that indeed had most impressive long thick smooth dark leaves. I still let a couple grow in the garden every year in case I have a yearning for their bitter greens.

These dandelions are also the best ones for making wishes!

If you must begin planting outside, stick to cold weather stuff (spinach, radishes, hardy greens and brassicas) for another month or more, depending on your elevation. Planting in a pot ensures good drainage, can limit mollusk access, and allow you to move them into the sun or out of the wind. It's not too late to start brassicas (cabbage, broccoli, etc.) indoors to set out next month as four-week-old starts. This works well for lettuce or mixed greens, as well. I like to start some kind of lettuce mixture in a flat. Working with baby plants, instead of seeding directly in the ground, allows me to control the spacing between plants and apply mulch between plants.

Lettuce can be an attractive landscaping choice in a perennial bed and is available now in an enormous variety of color and texture. Cabbage and cauliflower, in particular among the brassicas, are almost architectural wherever they are found.

Tell everybody that it's a Vitamin D Drill! Rush outside and enjoy light and heat on the rare occasions they appear from the heavens. Get your vitamin D every day! Say hello to the congregations of Box Elder bugs on the sunny side of a wall. (they're harmless and pretty!) It's only March! The cloud forest needs-wants-should stay damp and wet until June.



Box Elder bugs

Church Directory

NEHALEM VALLEY BIBLE CHURCH

Gary Taylor, Pastor
Grant & North Streets, Vernonia
503 429-5378
Sunday School 10:00 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.
Nursery available
Wednesday Service 7:00 p.m.

VERNONIA FOURSQUARE CHURCH

Carl Pense, Pastor
850 Madison Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-1103
Sunday Worship Service: 10:30 a.m.
Children's Sunday School

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS

Marc Farmer, Branch President
1350 E. Knott Street, Vernonia
503 429-7151
Sacrament Meeting, Sunday 10 a.m.
Sunday School & Primary 11:20 a.m.
Relief Society, Priesthood and
Young Women, Sunday 12:10 p.m.

SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST

Gary S. Walter, Pastor
2nd Ave. and Nehalem St., Vernonia
503 429-8301
Morning Worship, 11:00 a.m.
Sabbath School 9:30 a.m.

ASSEMBLY OF GOD

Wayne and Maureen Marr
662 Jefferson Ave., Vernonia,
503 429-0373
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.

VERNONIA CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Sam Hough, Evangelist
410 North Street, Vernonia
503 429-6522
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.
Every Wednesday:
Ladies' Bible Study 9:30 a.m.
Ladies' Worship 10:00 a.m.
Children's Choir 3:00 p.m.
Family Bible Study 7:00 p.m.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

359 "A" Street, Vernonia
503 429-4027
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Sunday Worship Service 11:00 a.m.
Wednesday Prayer Meeting 7:00 p.m.

ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

Rev. Luan Tran, Administrator
960 Missouri Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-8841
Mass Sunday 12:00 Noon
Religious Educ. Sunday 10:30 a.m.

VERNONIA COMMUNITY CHURCH

Grant Williams, Pastor
957 State Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-6790
Sunday Breakfast 9:00 a.m.
Morning Worship 9:45 a.m.
Children and Nursery 10:00 a.m.
Youth Group 6:00 p.m.
Preschool Mon. & Wed. 9:00 a.m.
Wednesday Prayer 6:00 p.m.
Tues. & Fri. Adult Volleyball 7:00 p.m.