

5-25-07 Local Treasures Right under Our Feet

Each spring, in the month of May, I am delighted with the sight of one of my favorite flowers. The sight of the little bluettes or Quaker Ladies always makes me smile as I recall the first time I noticed them and how I introduced them to my yard in Plympton. I was visiting in Maine a couple decades ago when I admired these tiny beauties in a friend's yard. She explained that she wanted to encourage native species and that these tiny wildflowers were known as bluettes or Quaker Ladies. They spread easily and, in fact, grow in drifts resembling a light snowfall.

At her invitation, I dug up a handful and happily planted them when I returned to Plympton. I wondered if they would survive. After all, they came from Maine. What would they think of this transplant to Massachusetts?

The funny thing is that, shortly thereafter, I was walking in the field behind the Plympton Post Office and, "What do you know?" I saw bluettes growing wild like crazy right here in Plympton. Of course, I dug some up and brought them home.

I could not tell you which plants are from Maine and which are from Plympton. I only know that all are happy and have been spreading for twenty years now. They are my prime motivation for raking leaves and picking up fallen branches at the end of the winter. I am, at that time, desperately looking forward to the appearance of my little Quaker Ladies. Each year I am rewarded with the sight of more and more of them.

They are a very tiny flower, each measuring about one quarter of an inch wide. They grow in clusters or tufts and in an ideal situation in wide drifts. They last for weeks and when they have had their show, their tiny leaves and threadlike stems disappear. They are not invasive. They are just happy visitors.

Every year these delightful guests remind me of two things. They remind me of the fact that we don't always know, let alone appreciate, what we have right at home. I did not even know that these miniscule beauties even existed in Plympton until someone in another state brought them to my attention.

They also remind me that when we plant native species, we don't need things like weed killers and fertilizers. These species are native to the existing conditions. There are native species for wet, dry, sunny and shady conditions. If we place the plant in the right habitat, it is happy and we can be happy because it will be low maintenance. Doesn't that sound good?

The benefits of planting native species go way beyond visual delights and being spared laborious maintenance programs. Living with native species means that they don't need fertilizers. This, in turn, means that we can reduce or even eliminate, feeding nitrates and phosphorous into our ponds, streams and groundwater. They can survive floods and droughts, also, because they are native to the area. You were thinking that this story had no public health message other than it is nice to have pretty things like wildflowers around us. Weren't you?

This is a good time of year to be thinking of this, especially if you live near a wetland or water body such as a stream or pond. If you are accustomed to "feeding" your lawn, then you are also feeding the weeds in the local wetlands.

Some people think it makes sense to apply herbicides to our ponds to kill the invasive weeds. It is effective, after all. However, those invasive weeds are also being

fed by our detergents and our lawn products, as they are commonly high in phosphorous and nitrates.

We can have a safer and more beautiful environment by planting native species instead of a lawn and by planting “rain gardens” in our detention areas. We even have more time left for activities other than lawn mowing when we plant native species, as they require only occasional mowing.

The little treasures right under our feet can be lifesavers.

A local treasure you might consider for information, plants, seeds and fun visits is the New England Wildflower Society, call 508-877-7630.