

GARDENING a la CARTE

by Marcus W. Meyer

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LEMONADE UNDER A TABEBUIA

As every gardener knows, planting seeds in the springtime can be an enriching experience. Cultivating the young seedling that has sprouted, watching it grow and bloom, harvesting the fruit—it's all part of the process.

When you've had a tiring day working in that spring garden or even when the first days of the summer doldrums set in, take a break. Grab a frosty lemonade and head for the flowery shade of a tabebuia tree. If you are lucky, the flower carpet under foot will be just as spectacular as the umbrella above. Cover your glass, though, unless you want a purple petal in your lemonade.

Sometimes, Mother Nature will even keep you from getting out in the garden for a period. Some gardeners use that time to catch up on housework or pay bills, but I prefer taking a different path during downtimes, whether it's from Mother

Nature or just a need to take a break from the physical work. That other path involves planting and harvesting of a sort, too. Of course, I'm talking about planting and reaping within the mind. The beauty of gardening within the mind is that you can do it anywhere in any kind of weather at any age. There is no better way (at least according to the polls that I've taken recently) to garden within the mind than by absorbing the wisdom of stories and tales from the garden.

If it's too hot, take a volume of stories and tales from the garden with you to the shade of that tabebuia. Don't have a tabebuia? — it's okay. Any good collection works equally well under a live oak or even a fiery maple in the fall. If it's too cold, cozy up in front of a crackling fire. If your airline flight is taking you over the Pacific Ocean, relax and start planting.

With the garden stories and tales in our collection, you are sure to be greatly inspired, mildly entertained, or at least, in a real stretch, modestly challenged. Its flowers go from humor to

exaggeration to silliness to curiosity to history to wisdom to eternal truths.

Let me be clear—you will gain little in the way of pure scientific knowledge in consuming these stories. A vast field of resources resides in the internet world or in published technical works that convey such knowledge. But the spirit of gardening transcends scientific names, soil science, entomology, and plant anatomy. Step into the garden on a cool spring morning and watch for the resurrection of the first daffodil waking from its winter rest. Throw out some bird seed on new fallen snow and see the bird tracks of cardinals, bluebirds, or goldfinches. Taste a fresh-picked, juicy apple from the tree in your backyard. Marvel at the color show that nature puts on in the fall. These comprise the spirit of gardening.

Regarding the relationship between the human spirit and the gardening spirit, allow me to quote the legendary farmer, Oliver Wendell Douglas of Green Acres fame, (you'll have to supply your own fife) "I came out here to get away from the rat race of the city. Out here where I could

breathe the pure air, work the fertile soil. Where a man can plant his seeds and watch 'em shoot upwards toward the sun and the sky, like our forefathers did. The farmer's the backbone of America. It's his gnarled hands, aching back that gives America its great strength.”

Choosing a good title is an important part of any literary endeavor. Some say the title should give a clear picture and brief one-line synopsis of the body. Others say the title should be subtle and challenge the reader to find the title's meaning in the body. Some will even try to use both strategies in the title (I, for one, do not employ this technique). Let us dig a little deeper into the meaning of *Lemonade Under a Tabebuia*, the title of this story.

‘Lemonade’ is obviously a refreshing beverage made from lemons. What else do we know about lemonade? Well ... there's ... uh ... there's the old cliché applied to difficult situations, ‘make lemonade out of lemons’. And then there's ... well

... uh ... okay, ‘Under’ is a preposition indicating where you would drink the lemonade. It is the correct choice here, because you certainly wouldn’t drink a lemonade while on a tree or in a tree. ‘A’ is an indefinite article indicating a single Tabebuia tree. Obviously, you couldn’t drink a lemonade under multiple trees. Finally, we have ‘Tabebuia’—an abbreviated form of ‘tacyba bebuya’, a name from the Brazilian Tupi people meaning ‘ant wood’. So, put it all together and we have *Lemonade Under a Tabebuia*. By applying deductive reasoning, it can only mean ... well ... uh ... it certainly would seem to ... uh ... undoubtedly, it conveys ... uh ... oh, never mind. Perhaps we should not over-analyze here. Continued digging could result in inane ramblings that have no relevance to the body of work.

I suppose that I should wax more seriously now. So, will the gardens now flourishing across this globe ever stop putting forth blooms? Most certainly they will not—God is the ultimate gardener, and whenever He decides it’s time for a change, I believe whatever He has in store will

have a garden, probably more beautiful than anything we can imagine.

Will the tiny garden at my house ever stop putting forth blooms? Most probably it will not either—there will come a time for me, like everyone else on this planet, when my hands will no longer be able to hold a shovel or a hoe. Maybe someone else can do the physical work and I can just enjoy their labor. Maybe it will never look like the gardens I have had in the past, and maybe it will be overrun with weeds, but as Bil Keane said in *Family Circus*, “Some weeds try to fool you by having flowers.”

If you feel, after absorbing the garden stories and tales in Squirrel Gardens, that the harvest is worth more than the mental ache that might come as a side effect, then rejoice in the fact that the planting will continue producing harvests with more of the same (at least until God assigns me to another garden elsewhere).

So, here's to fertile minds and bountiful harvests of wisdom.

Marcus Meyer

Continued partaking of such material has not been proven to cause any long-term ill effects—I don't think ... but then, no one living has actually been exposed to it long enough for any reliable scientific conclusion.

A MOLE IN SADIE JOHNSON'S GARDEN

The official definition: Mole—any of various small, insectivorous mammals of the family Talpidae. The gardener's definition: Mole—a royal pain.

Rarely will you find a garden not afflicted with this bane of horticultural idealism. Sadie Johnson's garden was no exception. Just as hopeful seedlings, in carefully prepared rows, bend toward the heavens above, along comes the unrepentant creature making his own rows, usually in cross direction, taking numerous seedling casualties in the process.

On one particular spring day, as Sadie grimly repaired the damage done by the uninvited visitor, she had a face-to-face encounter with the

underground menace. Sadie, with her glasses resting on the end of her nose, and the mole, with his rudimentary eyes, stared at each other in a mock contest of who would blink first.

Finally, Sadie said, "Mole, let's have a talk."

"Fine with me," replied the mole in a squeaky voice.

"Mole, I have a proposition for you," stated the gardener. "Are you interested?"

"What did you have in mind?" inquired the mole.

And thus began an hour of negotiation between the gardener and the mole. There were periods of intense dialogue coupled with more sedate moments of give and take. At last, a contract emerged, the first of its kind as far as anyone around knew. Sadie would provide a twenty-foot by twenty-foot corner of the garden for the mole. She placed every insect that she could dig up in the rest of the garden into the square that the mole occupied. In exchange for this free board and lodging,

the mole would agree not to venture into the rest of Sadie's garden.

As the season wore on, the deal appeared to be a win-win for both parties. Sadie harvested a record crop from her garden, and she didn't have the aggravation and expense of dealing with the mole. The mole had his needs satisfied without mining around all day in the dirt, constantly hitting his head on buried rocks. In fact, things were so good for the mole that word soon reached other moles in the area and his plot became crowded with an onslaught of visitors. This development endeared Sadie to every other gardener around, as their gardens were now rid of moles; however, it left the mole with little choice but to go back to Sadie and try to renegotiate the contract. Sadie agreed to a compromise that involved the construction of living quarters that rose four stories along the path where the bulk of the moles traveled. Since this population influx came about largely by word of mouth, with one mole telling another down the line about the luxurious accommodations, the mole and Sadie agreed to give the complex a name—

‘Moletell’. Although some in higher academic circles may disagree, country folks know that ‘Moletell’ was eventually shortened to the word ‘motel’.

Sadly, an unforeseen problem developed in Moletell. The moles began to get fat, what with all that free food and the lack of digging exercise. And a bunch of fat moles lying out in the sun at poolside soon became easy pickings for birds of prey and local bobcats. Over the months, Sadie came to have affection for the now depressed mole. She agreed to plow up the original plot, erasing all memories of it for the mole. She gave him a smaller plot at the other end of the garden with a narrow extension running one hundred feet out that served as an exercise course for his digging. They both promised not to tell anyone about the new plot.

So, while Moletell was conceived with fair and equitable thought, it simply didn’t work out. Sometimes failure in one venture can give rise to success in another. Now, Sadie had a son by the name of Howard, and Howard Johnson’s ... well, another story for another time.

For the rest of her life, Sadie Johnson continued innovating and adapting to whatever life gave to her. Her out-of-the-box thinking changed many a neighbor's approach to living in harmony with the rest of God's marvelous creation. Though she has long since passed away, her inspiration lives on as a light on the hill in ways far beyond the garden into the realm of humanity itself. Nevertheless, she is most always remembered when the first mole track is spotted each spring in the garden.

THE SAGA OF HENRY LAMBERT

Having been less than a stellar student in school, Henry began his pursuit of a livelihood at the lower end of the employment spectrum. His first job found him packing apples at Lawson's Orchard. His capacity for learning new approaches fell well under the bar of business innovation standards, but Henry was an innocent soul and there was nary a man that knew him who wouldn't vouch for his character. He worked steadily for fourteen hours a day, six days per week during the packing season. His work habits gained him plenty of odd jobs when apples weren't in.

The widow Jones had 120 acres of farmland to take care of by herself, and she used Henry's strong back many times to help with the chores. She took such a liking to him that she rented him a house in town that she owned for \$10.00 per month. Granted, it only had 2 rooms, but that was all Henry needed. The real plus to the deal came

with the two acres of prime ground behind the little shack.

When spring came around, Henry decided to plant his very first garden on those prime two acres of dirt. Henry made a concerted effort to learn everything he could about gardening. He read and read and reread. He didn't always grasp what the pages revealed, but he still felt confident he could do it.

The first thing he set out to do took him to Acme Hardware in town, where he purchased ten rolls of clear poly plastic to use in solarizing the soil. After carefully laying out the plastic and making sure he sealed down the edges, he started to think.

Eager to get started on planting his garden, Henry figured he needed to speed up the solarization process somehow. After several days of contemplation, Henry came up with an idea that he thought might help move things along. Acme Hardware didn't have what he needed, so Henry drove to Janesville, where he purchased fifty-four sun lamps from the wholesale electric supply house.

Now, if you're wondering how he came up with a calculation of fifty-four lamps, well, that quantity was all the supply house had in stock at the time. It's hard to say how many he would have bought had they had more. He also purchased seventy-two extension cords of various lengths.

Henry's heart pounded with anticipation the entire drive home. He worked all weekend setting up the grid of lamps. With the sun during the day and the lamps at night, he could get twenty-four hours of sunlight for solarization instead of twelve, thus cutting in half the time needed to complete the process. When he finished the last block on Sunday night, he looked at his watch and saw that it was 8:15. A defining moment in Henry's life had come. He flipped the switch and his garden shone in all the spectrum of light that the old sun provided during the day. Henry's grin stretched from ear to ear.

Unfortunately, Henry's glory did not last exceptionally long. The first sign that perhaps something in his plan may have gone awry appeared with the airplane that almost landed in his backyard because the pilot thought the lights were part of the

runway from the airport. Then the confused roosters in the area started crowing wildly, and the dogs of the neighborhood started howling simultaneously. The emergency response team had to dispatch four units over to the First Community Church because eleven people collapsed thinking the Rapture had come. Fifteen minutes after flipping the switch, Henry's sunlamps went out, as did one-third of the lights in town.

An angry crowd gathered outside Henry's little shack, but no one really had the heart to yell directly at Henry. A few calmer heads convinced Henry to just let the sun take care of the job. So, Henry moved on to the next phase of his gardening endeavor.

Having read that coffee grounds and eggshells, among other things, provided nutrients for the soil, Henry took to stocking up on those provisions by clearing the shelves at the local grocery store. He drank ten cups of coffee and ate a dozen eggs at every meal so he would have plenty of goodies for soil improvement. Eventually, Todd Falcon, the manager of the grocery store, limited

the quantity of those goods that Henry could buy each week.

Despite his cholesterol level shooting through the roof, Henry remained unfazed by the mounting challenges. He read that earthworms were particularly good for the soil, so he began collecting worms of all kinds and releasing them into his garden. While the idea had merit, it lacked a certain level of discernment. To Henry, a worm was a worm; consequently, the cutworm, grub, and wireworm population increased at the same rate as the earthworm. The destructiveness of the former did not show up immediately, but eventually they wreaked havoc. As Henry walked among the brown, stripped, and dead plants in his garden, he became disheartened. Then he spotted one shining beacon of green coming from the far back corner of the two acres. There stood a thriving, healthy tomato plant bearing one huge, plump fruit.

Word of this solitary tomato soon got out. From the hardware store to the beauty shop to the funeral parlor, everyone talked about Henry Lambert's tomato. The gardener beamed with pride at

every accolade heaped upon him. When the fervor waned, Jed Tolson, down at the feed store, posed a simple thought. He wondered aloud just how much that tomato ended up costing Henry. After assembling the last set of numbers, the boys down at the store concluded that the one tomato cost Henry \$6,487.52. Such a revelation did not seem to have any effect on the gardener. For a man like Henry, there simply was no price to put on the value of pride. At least that's what he thought at the time.

The story does not end there, though. When the news of Henry's tomato reached Janesville, it created quite a stir at the Tomato Grower's Cooperative. Forstner Lamar, head of a big corporate farming enterprise, ended up buying Henry's tomato for \$6,500.00. They used the seeds as foundation stock for building a whole new generation of miracle tomatoes.

In the end, Henry Lambert made \$12.48 in profit on his tomato, a paltry sum compared to the wealth that the tomato generated in pride.

What, might you ask, did Henry do with his gardening profit? He put it in the collection plate the next Sunday at church. That's just the way Henry was.

POWER GARDENING

Having recently entered into the bonds of matrimony, Sam and Rebecca continued to daily gain new perspectives into all that such a commitment entailed. With each of them bringing a healthy bank account into the marriage, they didn't struggle with finances as some do in adapting to their new life. Pooling of their assets allowed them to purchase a new home in a new development on the outskirts of town.

Rebecca spent her days as a nurse at a local doctor's office, and Sam spent his as an account executive for a metal fabricating plant in town. Their respective positions gave them the luxury of free weekends. On one such weekend, the couple leisurely sipped iced tea on their back porch. As with many new housing developments, landscaping could best be described as being in its infancy.

Rebecca looked out across their barren backyard and said, "Sam, why don't we put in a garden in that back corner?"

“Hmm,” replied Sam. “I’m thinking we can do that. I’ll do a little planning, lay it out, and get started next weekend.”

Taking her husband by the hand, Rebecca said, “It’s kind of exciting, isn’t it, Sam?”

“Yes, it is,” said Sam. “Yes, it is.”

The next day Sam began laying out string lines to mark the boundaries of their garden project. Rebecca watched him and in a word of encouragement said, “That looks good, Sam. What you have marked off is about the size I was thinking.”

“Uh, huh,” said Sam.

Rebecca went back inside the house to get them some more tea. When she got back outside, she couldn’t help but notice a sparkling gleam in her husband’s eye—a gleam she had not seen before. His entire countenance shone as bright as the sun, and he began working at a feverish pace.

“Sam, what are you doing?”

“I’ve got it all under control, Beck.”

“But you’ve changed the string lines.”

“I’ve got it all under control, Beck,” said Sam again.

“But, Sam,” exclaimed Rebecca. “It looks like you’re marking off the entire backyard.”

“I’ve got it all under control, Beck.”

In a bit of diplomatic wisdom, Rebecca said no more. She couldn’t help but have an uneasy feeling, though. She murmured something about learning to adapt and then went back into the house.

The week passed quickly and on Saturday Sam put on some old jeans and got ready to go to work outside.

“I’ll change and be out to help you in a few minutes, Sam.”

“Uh, that’s not necessary, Beck. This first part is the roughest work, and I’ve got it all under control.”

“But ... but,” stammered Rebecca.

“Let me get this first part done and then you can help me plant.”

“Okay, Sam. I guess you’ve got it all under control, then?”

“Yes, I do,” said Sam. “Yes, I do.”

Rebecca slipped on some comfortable sandals and sat down on the living room sofa. Looking out the front window, she noticed a big truck with a lowboy trailer stopping in front of their house. The trailer carried a massive front-end loader. She didn’t think too much about it until she saw Sam walk to the street and start talking to the driver. The driver then unloaded the loader from the trailer and began showing Sam the controls for the machine. The semi then pulled away, leaving the enormous machine in their front yard. When Rebecca walked out front, she saw Sam patting one of the big tires that were as tall as him. She had seen that same pat as a kid when her father used to give their big dog a pat while saying “Good dog”.

“Sam, what in the ...”

Perhaps it would be a good time to relate a few incidents in Sam's life that may have influenced his thinking on this garden project.

The first incident occurred, when as a lad of 4 years, he stood on the front porch with his older brothers and his father. The city garbage truck pulled up in front of their house and a burly worker grabbed their trash can and effortlessly dumped the contents into the back of the truck. Then the worker pushed some controls and the truck let out a powerful roar as it compressed the garbage in the back of the truck. Apparently, Sam became so moved by all that power that he stated, as only a 4-year-old could, that he wanted to be a garbage truck driver when he grew up.

The second influence occurred over a two-week period, when as a 10-year-old, he got a severe case of chicken pox. He spent a great deal of time looking out his bedroom window and watching huge excavators and bulldozers moving dirt all day long at the construction site across the street from their house. Sam became so moved by all that

power that he stated he wanted to operate a bulldozer when he grew up.

The final evidence came when, as a teenager, Sam worked for a construction company over the summer washing and cleaning their gigantic equipment. He had his picture taken by one of his friends as he stood inside the bucket of one of their large machines.

Of course, Rebecca knew none of this history when she saw Sam standing by the big front-end loader. She gained that knowledge later in life during a time of reminiscing at one of their family gatherings.

“Isn’t it great, Beck?” put forth Sam. ‘Look at that big diesel engine. Can’t you feel the power?’”

“Did you really have to get something so big to make a little garden in the corner of the backyard?” asked Rebecca.

“Well, you see, I got to analyzing the soil and discovered that it is so sandy that it would hardly

grow anything. So, I decided to remove a layer and replace it with some good rich topsoil.”

“I can understand that, Sam. How much were you planning to replace?”

“Three ... mmph.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite understand that, Sam.”

“Three feet,” repeated Sam.

“I see, and that’s why you need all that ... uh, power.”

“Absolutely,” answered Sam. “Then I got to thinking that with this big machine I could easily just go ahead and do the whole backyard. That way we could have a big garden ... like you really want. Plus, I worked a great deal with the trucking company. They could bring in the good soil and haul away the bad all in one motion. I also called the county, and they came out and assured me there were no utility lines anywhere in the backyard.”

“How many truckloads of good soil did you order, Sam?”

“Twen ... mmph.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite understand that, Sam.”

“Twenty.”

“I see ... well, have fun, Sam.”

Sam climbed up onto the big machine, cranked it up, and practiced with the controls until the first truck arrived.

“Where do you want me to dump it, sir?” asked Eddie, the driver.

“I need it in the backyard, and the closest way is down the left side of the house. It’s a little tight, but I figure you’ve got about 2 feet to spare, and I’ll help guide you back.”

“Okay, sir,” said Eddie. “We’ll give it a go.”

Eddie backed the truck into the driveway and angled it down the side of the house. Naturally, with the ground being so sandy, the tires cut some respectable ruts in the grass. Eddie seemed to have the truck moving well toward the backyard. Suddenly, the big dump truck, with its heavy load,

started sliding down the slight slope of the sideyard. Before Eddie could get it stopped, the corner of the bed caught the neighbor's fence.

"I'm sorry about the fence, Mr. Wilson," said Eddie. "She's just not gonna get back there."

"Don't worry, Eddie. I'll take care of the neighbor's fence. I guess you better pull back out."

"Will do, Mr. Wilson."

Eddie put the transmission into low/low gear and let out the clutch to move forward. Instead of moving forward, though, the big rig just dug deeper into the soft sand and got stuck.

"I tell you what, Eddie," said Sam. "Have you got a chain?"

"Yes, sir," replied Eddie.

"Okay, Eddie. I'll hook up that big front-end loader and help pull you out."

They hooked up the chain and Sam slowly eased the front-end loader forward and began pulling the dump truck out of its hole. They only ran into one minor problem in the process. The angle

that Sam was pulling led the rear axle of the tandem dump truck into the corner of the house's air conditioning unit. When Eddie saw what was happening, he let loose a blast of the air horn, but it was to no avail.

“Don't worry about the air conditioner, Eddie. I'll take care of it.”

Sam and his big machine eventually got Eddie and the dump truck out, but not without making some very deep ruts in the grass and breaking the sidewalk across the front yard.

“Is there any reason we can't go down the right side of the house, Mr. Wilson?” asked Eddie. “It looks like there's plenty of room.”

“Well, it's a longer path over the grass. But I guess it's our only choice at this point,” answered Sam.

So, Eddie backed his truck across the grass in the front yard leading to the right side of the house. Of course, the truck left some more respectable ruts in the grass. Eddie slowly backed up and he appeared to be making it without any further damage.

As Sam watched Eddie maneuvering the big dump truck back, he got this feeling that he'd forgotten something about the right side of the house.

Sam hooked up the front-end loader to the front of Eddie's truck and pulled him out of the hole from the collapsed septic tank. With the right side now out of the question for access, Eddie had to dump his load of rich topsoil in the front yard. He then left without taking a load of poor soil with him because Sam couldn't get around the collapsed septic tank to get into the backyard with the big front-end loader.

Plan "F" required Sam to rent a smaller skid-steer loader that could get into the backyard. Needless to say, he had to renegotiate the deal with the trucking company.

Six weeks later, with the neighbor's fence repaired, a new air conditioning unit installed, the broken sidewalk fixed, the septic tank replaced, and new sod installed, Rebecca planted her first tomato plant. Sam knelt beside her and helped her

plant the rest of the garden. Seemingly unfazed by his experience, he planted with a gleam in his eye.

“Beck, when we get done planting, I’ve got to go down to the hardware store and pick up a sprayer so we can properly maintain the garden.”

“Okay,” said Rebecca.

“Yeah, they’ve got a great deal on this power sprayer with a twenty-horsepower engine. We can flat out do some spraying with that baby.”

“Really, Sam?”

“Yeah, and in a few months, they’re going to have a new shipment of power rototillers in so we can till the soil for next season’s crops.”

“I hope they’ll have some models with plenty of power,” said Rebecca.

“Oh, I’m sure they will,” said Sam. “I’m sure they will.”

While Sam felt confident they would have plenty of powerful tools to continue gardening for the rest of their life together, Rebecca felt equally confident that before she’d suggest any other

project, she would make sure there wasn't a power tool for it.

GARDENS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Grackle 72, you're clear to land at Feeder 4. Do you copy Grackle 72? ... Grackle 72, you're breaking up. Do you copy? You're clear to land at Feeder 4.

No, no, no, guys. I said Grackle 72 is clear to land at Feeder 4. Not 72 Grackles ... man! All incoming flights, please divert to a holding pattern until we can get some of these Grackles out of here.

Sparrows, listen up. You're going to have to stay in the Bougainvillea Hangar until the big boys leave. Can anybody tell me how many branches are still available at this time? ... Twelve, okay, good. Thanks.

Mourning Dove 31, you better do a temporary on the Shepherd's Hook. It's hard to tell how long the Grackles are going to stay.

Ground Dove 43, you better be careful. You know Grandpa Grackle there doesn't like anybody

else on his block ... I know; you were there first, but I don't have enough staff to police every feeder, so it's every bird for himself. Also, be advised, the vet isn't in yet ... Good choice, 43. The ground is a safer bet.

Okay, it looks like something spooked the Grackles because they just left in mass, but code 52 is still in effect. You know they can come back in thirty seconds in mass ... Okay, it appears like they've left the area, so all incoming, we've now lifted code 52.

Mourning Dove 31, you're clear for Saucer 6.

Blue Jays 1 and 2, the popcorn is all gone, but we still have some high-octane peanuts at Block Feeders 2 and 3. I wouldn't waste much time, though, you know they don't last long. Yeah, we'll have more tomorrow morning.

Sparrows, I would recommend that no more than six or so come out of the hangar at this time ... I know you're just little guys, but ... well, okay, I know you're fast, so go ahead at your own discretion.

Redwing Blackbirds 56 and 83, you're free to land at Hanging House 3. Yes, that's the one with the songbird special food ... I know, I'm just giving you a treat today. Just be courteous and don't flick too much of it on the ground ... Yeah, it attracts those fire ants. Good eating!

Flight above the Live Oak, I see you, but I can't quite make out who you are ... Well, hi ya, Red. I haven't seen you in a long time. Where have you been? ... A bug bonanza in the pine forest. Well, good for you. You wanna land? ... Yeah, it's been so long. Just give me a minute, I'm gonna have to look up your chart to see what we might have for you. Let's see here, Red-Headed Woodpecker, um ... okay, what's that? ... You don't mind some of the songbird special. Okay, yeah, it looks like Redwing Blackbird 56 has left Hanging House 3, so there's room for you there now ... Yeah, don't stay a stranger.

Incoming flock at eleven o'clock, can you identify yourselves? ... International Flock 89, Canadian Geese for a stopover ... Okay, not a problem. Just stay to your left and you'll see the water

facilities at Cherry Pond. There is ample smooth rock space if you just want to rest and there are plenty of corn feeders around the pond ... We're always glad to see our friends from the north.

Attention all avian traffic! We have a Code 17 now in progress. Repeat, we have a Code 17 now in progress. Squirrel at Feeder Block 4. Repeat, squirrel at Feeder Block 4. We recommend all avian traffic stay on the west side of the garden at Feeders 7 through 14 ... I know, Redwing 31. We have peanuts for him at Block 3, but sometimes he eats sunflower seeds first and then takes the peanuts and buries them ... How do I know, Redwing 28, I'm not a squirrel ... Will advise when the area is clear.

Go ahead, Hummingbird Red ... That's a roger. The helo fuel tank is full of Sucrose Red. You're clear to approach fuel station. There is a butterfly at Port 4, but all other ports are open ... Roger that, Hummingbird Red. Hummingbird Green can refuel as well.

Incoming flight at two o'clock, please identify yourself ... Lovebird Snowy ... Cool name, Snowy. Have you ever been here before, Snowy? ... Okay, Snowy, I'm going to have you land at the Celtic Dish Feeder ... Yeah, it's the tall one about thirty-six degrees to your right. Nobody there right now, so it'll give you a chance to get oriented ... Be advised, though, that there are Sandhill Cranes doing groundwork at the west end of the property, so don't approach too low.

Attention all avian traffic! We have lifted code 17. The squirrel has left the premises ... Go ahead, Blue Jay 1 ... I don't know. Let me get some eyes on it. It looks like he wiped out the sunflower seeds on Block Feeder 4 ... Right, it figures ... You're out on Block 6 and 7, too? ... I'll get it restocked by this afternoon ... Any peanuts left on Block 4? What do you think? ... Right, it figures.

Talk to me, Sparrow 1 ... You've got twenty more sparrows coming in? ... Okay, no problem. Just go wherever you see an empty spot. You do have about eight or ten, no that's twelve Ground Doves on the ground doing cleanup of seed that the

Grackles flicked all over the place ... You get along okay with the Ground Doves? ... Okay, good.

(Siren Blaring) This is a warning to all avian incoming or already on the ground. We are in lockdown mode. Repeat, we are in lockdown mode. There is a cat in the field. Again, there is a cat in the field. All incoming traffic should remain in a holding pattern or seek shelter of a high fence or building. All birds on the ground should begin evacuating immediately per Emergency Protocol X. Go, go, go now!

Security Team Mockingbirds A and B, are you in position? ... You are clear to engage. Begin dive-bombing immediately.

Go ahead, Mockingbird A ... Mission accomplished. Area clear ... Super job, guys.

Attention all avian crews. We have lifted lockdown mode. Repeat, we have lifted lockdown mode.

Grackle 72, is that you calling? ... Yeah, you can come back as long as you don't have seventy-one more Grackles coming with you ... You don't

have seventy-one more Grackles? ... Good ... What's that Grackle 72? You're breaking up. I'm getting an awful lot of background noise ... You have eighty-one more Grackles? ... NO, NO, NO, you have to wait for clearance ... Never mind.

Go ahead, Cardinal 1 ... No, they're gone. You got the Mrs. with you? ... You've pretty much got the place to yourselves with it being dusk and all ... Yeah, I missed you at dawn ... It was kind of windy. All right then, I'll see you at dawn tomorrow morning.

As the orange sun slips down in the evening sky, another day in the life of an air traffic controller at Gardens International Airport in Profitville comes to a close. Thanks to Pastor Fred for his active imagination in the embellishment of this scene.

PATCHES THE GARDEN CAT

One spring afternoon our son looked out the window overlooking the back porch of our farmhouse and found a thin, smoky gray and white kitten peering back at him and meowing. What could the boy do but take out a bowl of milk. Lapping it up quickly, the little thing meowed some more. Our son called us out to have a look at those sparkling yellowish green eyes. That pretty much sealed the deal. We took her to the vet and had her checked out.

Two hundred dollars less in my wallet, I carried her out to the car in the pet taxi that we had for our dog. From my perspective, she had to stay now because she owed us those big bucks and would have to work it off. From a cat's perspective, working it off meant just being cute. Our initial agreement called for her to be an outside cat with the right to come into the garage at night. Gradually, she became a little more daring by waiting in the bushes outside the basement door and sneaking in

when we opened the door. She would fly over to the sofa, jump up, and curl up into a little ball. In cat body language that meant, “If I’m real quiet, maybe they won’t notice me.”

As you may suspect, I had to renegotiate our contract. She became an inside cat at night and during the day when we were inside. Despite this victory, she remained a hard worker when she was outside during the day. She performed all the chores established by the feline code of ethics, including hunting mice and moles, chasing squirrels, and scattering butterflies. To my surprise, though, she showed an extraordinary interest in what I did in the garden. She sat and watched with an inquisitive look and occasionally came over to inspect my work.

Now cats are a different cog in the gardening wheel of life. Dogs joyfully get into the dirty work. Cats, on the other hand, ... I’m reminded of the sign that I saw at the vet’s office— “Dogs have masters. Cats have staff.” Patches became perfectly content to let Ruff the gardening dog handle the heavy work such as digging, weeding, and

irrigation. She leaned toward the less physical side of management that required more finesse.

One of the earliest chores that she took to consisted of tree bark testing for strength and consistency of thickness. If on her way up the tree, her claws could penetrate to the designated depth and support her weight (the formula calculated and established by cat scientists in some previous century), then she gave the tree a healthy rating. If, on the other hand, any bark flaked off or her claws penetrated too deeply, then the tree obviously lacked the required nutrients to produce a healthy bark layer. I believe she once referred to that lack of proper nutrients as a meownesium deficiency. As any serious scientist knows, though, there is always a certain risk involved with these types of tests. The one issue that she would run into with a meownesium deficiency is that of bark caramewocracy. I know that sounds like some kind of scientific jargon, but the bottom line is that with bark caramewocracy what goes up doesn't always come down. A ladder is a handy tool to have on hand during this type of test.

Every healthy garden should support a multitude of different species, some beneficial to its growth and others not so much. One such ‘not so much’ species belongs in the Talpidae family and is more commonly called the mole. I have given Patches free rein in handling this particular issue and it seems to have meshed nicely with her feline abilities. One fall afternoon she brought in a John Doe mole for questioning. Some may question the harshness of her interrogation methods, but as far as I am concerned, it is her call. When this particular John Doe did not answer truthfully, she would bat him upside his head. Eventually, she seemed satisfied with his answers. When she felt it had reached the point where her questions were no longer producing any more high-quality intel, she released the subject. Apparently, the mole heeded her warnings to stay out of her garden, because I haven’t had a mole problem for at least a year.

Almost everyone has a fondness for butterflies. Just the other day, when I turned the page on my *Family Circus* daily calendar, I saw Dolly watch a butterfly fly away and say, “I wish

butterflies liked to land on us like mosquitos and flies do.” Their beauty and gentleness are fascinating, indeed. There is a stage in the life of butterflies, though, that must be considered when trying to balance beauty and damage in the garden. Since the balancing point is often relative and hard to quantify for us humans, I have left the job of butterfly crowd dispersal agent to Patches and her innate feline discretion. This, of course, relieves me of a great deal of stress. Her approach to the role is really rather base and intuitive. When she feels the number of butterflies present has exceeded proper balance parameters, she pounces out from her observation point under the foliage and the butterflies react by scattering from the garden. She then returns to another observation point to do further surveillance.

One area that Patches took on herself without any encouragement or training involved the physical fitness of another fellow garden resident, namely the lizard. Perhaps you’ve never given this much thought, but she believes that a physically fit lizard is much more efficient at keeping bugs under

control. Furthermore, a lizard whose legs are strong and whose lungs are healthy stands a better chance of eluding predators. So, with such a noble cause to motivate her, she embarks on a strenuous workout regimen with each lizard that seeks residence in her garden. Every morning she chases them through the obstacle course of foliage, pots, and sprinkler heads, building coordination and endurance in her subjects. I know, some of you might think that's just what cats like to do, but I would argue that she'd much rather be curled up on a nice pillow instead of engaging in such grueling exertions. For those sluggards who fail to push themselves adequately in the pursuit of fitness, she picks them up with her mouth, carries them back to where they started, and makes them begin all over again. I'm sure there are some in the lizard community who consider her a hard master, but I would say it is better to be living free and healthy than to be a tasty meal for a snake or an egret. Cold hard math supports this conclusion as the lizard community is growing by leaps and bounds, literally and figuratively.

Still another time, Patches revealed a scientific side that I had not seen before. My wife found her inside the screened-in porch over against the rail chewing on a leaf of one of her prized orchids. As she was about to scold the creature, I stepped in and prevented an unjust accusation. In examining the leaf, I posed a question. What if what she is doing is actually a controlled experiment to create a mutation process that would eventually yield an orchid with serrated leaf margins? My wife looked at me in disbelief. Perhaps it was simply a lack of discernment on her part in not recognizing the potential botanical breakthrough involved, but I wisely gathered Patches up in my arms and removed her from the scene.

As resourceful and diligent as Patches is in doing all her work, she continues to amaze me with her time management. In fact, I am quite envious of her success in that area. Somehow, with everything she does, she still manages three, four, or more guilt-free naps during the day.

RUFF THE GARDEN DOG

Prancing behind the glass, tail erect, eyes bright, the little Cairn Terrier caught our hearts. A few tears flowed down our cheeks. It had been two years since our Golden Retriever named Goldie and our Cairn Terrier named Todo had left for doggie heaven. We knew. We knew even before the attendant handed the bundle of pride to our waiting arms. We had to go out of town for a week, but we didn't want someone else to get him, so we paid on the spot and worked a deal with the pet store to board him till we got back.

When we returned, we immediately went to the pet store to bring our new buddy home. How the attendant knew we were coming, I don't know, but he stood there holding our puppy as we walked into the store.

After a few months, Ruff began running through the grass instead of hopping over it. We also noticed that about time his interest in gardening beginning to grow.

One day I grabbed a shovel and set out to plant a few shrubs in the backyard. About halfway through the first hole, Ruff came over to me, sniffed the shovel, sniffed the pile of dirt, and looked up at me and said, “This looks like fun. Can I help?” Without waiting for an answer, he jumped down into the hole and began to kick out dirt quite vigorously. I let him continue as it made less work for me. After a while, he jumped up out of the hole and looked at me again.

“Didn’t I do good, Daddy?” he asked me in canine body language.

When I put the shovel back down in the hole to make it just a little deeper, he would have none of it. Using doggie deductive reasoning, he concluded that he had more work to do, and he jumped back into the hole. I finally assured him it was good enough and picked him up out of the hole.

Having worked up a respectable doggie thirst, Ruff headed for his water bowl. He came back and watched me pushing the soil back around the new plant. Once again, he felt the need to help.

Unfortunately, his accuracy didn't match his enthusiasm. But what can I say? He had only begun his puppy gardening probation period. By the afternoon's end, it became apparent that both of us would need a bath.

Ruff's enthusiasm for pulling weeds equaled his planting enthusiasm. After a minute of observation, he joined me in the chore. He would pull up the weed with his mouth and take off, shaking it vigorously, so that no excess dirt remained on the weed. Now I know some of you may wonder how I kept him from pulling up good plants as well. You must consider that God gave him the skills, and I merely nursed along his discernment with a few plant ID sessions and an occasional emphasis such as "no" or "ut" when required.

As winter's end approached, I decided to expand my sprinkler system for the spring growing season. I laid out the pipes where I wanted them and began gluing the parts together. Ruff went over and picked up a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch tee with his mouth and dropped it on my shoe.

“Ruff, that’s a tee,” I said. “I need a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch coupler. Go grab one and bring it here.”

Believe it or not, he ran over and picked up a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch coupler and brought it straight to ... me.

“Thank you, Ruff ...”

Okay, maybe I could have said, “Ruff, bring back that coupler, as he gleefully ran around the backyard with it in his mouth.” It could have been my fault. I probably didn’t speak clearly enough at the time.

One of Ruff’s favorite gardening activities involved spreading landscape rock in some of the plant beds. His personal favorite type of rock was egg rock, as it fit perfectly into a Cairn Terrier’s mouth. He would survey a bed and then make a selection of rock. After a few times around the backyard, he’d pause to have a closer look and then make a few more passes. He’d finally decide which bed needed the rock the most and then deposit it. A few years later, we made a move to Missouri and, of course, we had to bring an egg rock along so he

could have it for old time's sake. (You never know, they could run out of rock in the Ozarks.)

Not limited to installation work, Ruff also excelled in sprinkler maintenance. When it came time to run a scheduled sprinkler head check, he eagerly volunteered his expertise. When a zone came on, he immediately (with exceeding great joy, I might add) went to work testing each head. My wife said he's just trying to bite the water coming out of the head because he doesn't like the sound. I say *au contraire*. I believe he's using his mouth to test the water pressure as it comes out of the head. It's a proven fact that dogs have some exceptional senses that we mere humans don't. I'm not sure that I can point to any specific scientific study that gauges a dog's ability to sense the level of water pressure with their mouth, but I'm sure there must have been a government grant out there funding such a study. The bottom line is that, despite being totally soaked from snout to tail, he never complains a bit.

Efficiently completing most gardening projects requires well-maintained gardening equipment. When it came time to move around the farm,

I found it most efficient to use a small utility vehicle. I purchased a used 2-cylinder unit with a dump bed. A frequent occupant of the passenger seat on trips around the garden, Ruff continued to amaze me with his extraordinary and often underappreciated skills. He dutifully sat surveying his domain as I loaded the bed with garden materials. When I started the engine up, he would immediately begin to howl. For a while I couldn't figure out why he did that, but then it hit me. I believe, with his super sensitive canine hearing, that he detected a misfire in cylinder # 2 and that was his way of communicating such. When I removed the spark plug from cylinder # 2, it became quite apparent that the thick coating of carbon had caused it to misfire. My wife said he was just howling because the noise hurt his ears, and he didn't like it. The evidence is far too coincidental for me. I prefer my own conclusion.

When my little gardening assistant finally passed away, I found it most appropriate to bury his ashes in the garden beneath a freshly planted 'Angel Face' rose.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES IN ARMADILLO TRAINING

Professor Ludwig Von Booring

In assessing the potential viability of any future endeavor, we must, of course, look to the past for any previous attempts of the endeavor. If someone has tried it before, then what was the situation in which they tried, and did it succeed or fail? If no one has tried it before, then we must consider ourselves pioneers charting new ground in the vast universe of profit and loss. So, this will be the basis for our discussions this term, as we delve into a series of such investigations. Our first endeavor that we will examine is that of the economic opportunities in armadillo training.

In researching the subject of armadillos, I discovered an attempt in 1982 in the border town of Laredo, Texas to train the animals as seeing eye guides. The endeavor ended rather quickly when 80% of the trainees died in accidents when they

mistook a chicken for the trainer, and they subsequently followed the chicken trying to cross the road. We do not know why the chicken crossed the road. Despite documented evidence of a mouse, a frog, a bear, and several dogs having achieved Hollywood star status, there is nothing to show that an armadillo has ever been considered anything close to even a backup stunt double. So, it is evident that we have a considerable amount of open road ahead of us.

First, we must establish what the armadillo has to offer in the way of skills and screen presence, so to speak. Armadillos are prolific diggers with sharp claws. Their diet usually consists of insects and grubs. They have large eyes but have very poor vision. The armor plates that protect them from predators are not a match for vehicles, though. When startled, as by an oncoming car, they will jump straight up into the air, which puts them in direct line with fenders, bumpers, and grills. So, we would have a few obstacles to overcome, but if a gecko can sell car insurance, then we can surely think of something the armadillo can market.

Nevertheless, a wise businessman does not focus on too narrow a market. I believe we should look at the more mundane applications in the middle-class consumer market for the most advantageous edge.

The average homeowner in the suburban or semi-rural neighborhood has not had a pleasant experience in their dealings with the armadillo. What if we could, through proper training, get the armadillo to stay on one side of the street, dig only in designated areas, and through genetic manipulation, pass these learning capabilities on to succeeding generations? Can you not see the possibilities here? Armadillo training franchises and brand name partnerships for a host of products, including eyeglasses, armadillo scented hand salve for gardeners that have their hands in dirt all day long, and patented tire technology based on the armor plate composition of the armadillo. Training that adequately domesticated our subject could produce possible inroads into the pet market as well.

Undoubtedly, the key to all this is marketing, marketing, marketing. We must engage those in the

advertising field to design attention-grabbing media that would show the consumer all the advantages of owning a trained armadillo. The cost-conscious and environmentally aware homeowner must want the armadillo so badly that he would stand in line overnight just to have one of the first market offerings.

In that regard, I believe the emphasis in any marketing campaign should rely on several key promotional points:

1) Lower taxes—the county would be able to reduce the number of workers it has to send around to clean up roadkill.

2) Environmentally friendly—a trained armadillo would keep soil insects controlled in an orderly manner without the need for hazardous, expensive chemical lawn and garden treatments.

3) Energy efficient—a trained armadillo would dig only in designated areas. Those areas would be sections of the yard that the owner is going to redo anyway. If it is the turfgrass area, then the owner could save considerable personal energy

by being able to just drop a plug of grass in the hole that the armadillo has dug. The owner doesn't have to expend energy digging a hole. We could apply the same principle with plants in non-grassy areas of the landscape.

4) Lower medical costs—by having the armadillo dig only in designated areas, it greatly reduces the exposure to sprained or broken ankles caused by stepping into a hole dug by the armadillo. Plus, with the added advantage of not having to dig holes for grass plugs and other plants, you lower the possibilities of back injuries and heat stress.

5) Savings in grocery and vet bills—a domesticated and trained armadillo can find his own food, greatly lowering the owner's grocery bill when compared to other pets. The armadillo also has a much lower need for veterinary services.

By developing a well thought out business plan, integrating an exciting marketing strategy, pursuing aggressive action towards federal grant money, and by greasing plenty of hands to get

special tax credits, you could at least become a regional economic powerhouse in the armadillo training field.

Regarding the seeking of federal grants, I suggest you make initial contact at the following address:

United States Government, Department of the Interior, Division of Animal Affairs, Bureau of Domestic Species Indigenous to the Lower States, Department of National Resources, Office of the Interdepartmental Cooperative Studies, Section 43 of the Federal Grant Initial Application Process, Bureau of Private and/or State Government Utilities and Resource Conservation Office, Subsection of Congressional Budgeting Committee, Oversight Board of Duplicate Applications, Clearance Officer for Legislative Inaction, Room 341 of the House Financial Obligations Act Fiduciary, Cubicle 61 in the Processing Room, Attention: Joe

Another important part of any capitalistic endeavor is the proper enforcement of the Privacy Act. To fulfill your obligations under this law, you

can either take the advanced path, which requires anywhere from \$3,000.00 to \$50,000.00 to implement depending on the legal firm and the number of clients you might have, or you can use the basic form from Bruno's Law Simplified website, which essentially states that "We don't tell nobody nothing".

So, in conclusion, I believe there is merit for an enterprising young person to consider this as a future livelihood. If I have whetted your appetite for this endeavor, please feel free to conduct further research on your own time.

LADY WITH THE PURPLE HAIR

In the shadow of a magnificent castle, sat the tiny village of Crepe. Within that little village, sat a little cottage with purple shutters and a purple roof. If it were not for the lady with the purple hair who lived there, the little cottage might have remained nondescript in the shadow of the magnificent castle. And rightly so, for the cottage drew its attention from that lady with the purple hair who kept a marvelous garden of purple flowers that almost engulfed the little cottage.

Violet, as the people in the village came to call her, had no other distinguishing features other than her sparkling eyes that reflected the world of purple around her. No one knew Violet's proper name, but it didn't matter for 'Violet' most assuredly fit. In fact, the people of the village knew little about Violet's past, but that, too, did not matter. What they did know came from their dealings with her on a daily basis as the flower lady. Though a bit on the shy side, she often spoke eloquently when

talking about her flowers. If anyone outside the village ever needed flowers, they quickly learned of Violet and her thriving flower business. Honest, kind, passionate, quick to lend a hand, giving—these embodied the person the village knew. She always said if she wasn't there to go ahead and take what you need and pay her later.

Even if you didn't need any flowers at the moment, exploring Violet's Garden stood out as a treat of its own. To enter her garden, you had to open a rustic wooden gate that had a carved bouquet of roses as a centerpiece. The cobblestone path had a border of Royal Purple Liriope on the right edge with a mass of Cosmos in the center and a tall background of Butterfly Bush. The left side of the path had a border of Ageratum at the edge with a mass of Purple Coneflower in the center and a tall background of Azalea. When the path ended, it opened into a large rectangular plot of precisely laid out squares of bedding plants. Walking the parallel paths through the plot, you would find Petunias, Pansies, Phlox, Lantana, Angelonia, Agastache, Larkspur, Salvia, and more. A giant

wall of Bougainvillea served as a background and dividing line for her property. Of course, the time of the year dictated what plot provided the most gorgeous color, but there never came a day when some part of her garden didn't glow with purple.

Her favorite part of her garden consisted of roses, roses, and more roses. She spent a great deal more time pampering the purple delights growing there than other areas. You never heard the other flowers complaining, though, for they never lacked what they needed. Forming a border around the huge rose garden, most appropriately, were Violets.

Leaving the rose garden, you would come upon a winding path of all kinds of purple wildflowers. Entirely informal in nature, one could say it had a whimsical quality to it (some said the same of Violet herself). When the wildflowers ended, a mass planting of 4 different varieties of Agapanthus or Lily of the Nile surrounded a small pond that was being fed water by a large windmill, painted purple, of course. As the path wound its way back towards the front of the property, you would find a small picnic area with specimen

Crape Myrtle trees that had circular plantings around them. One had Society Garlic; another one Purple Queen; another one Oyster Plants; and so on. At the center of the picnic area sat a large wooden table with wooden stools, all painted purple, of course. Next to the picnic area, Violet had her modest greenhouse filled with magnificent orchids.

While such a wonderful garden certainly took up much of Violet's time, every day she took the time to take a cartful of her flowers up to the queen in the magnificent castle. She would sometimes be gone for hours, but she always returned with an empty cart. The queen must have been a wonderful lady. Some in the village even said she was honest, kind, passionate, quick to lend a hand, and giving—traits rarely spoken of in the regal world.

One dark September day, the people in the village received the saddest of news. Their beloved queen had passed away. The villagers naturally flocked to Violet's flower shop to buy flowers to send to the royal family, but they couldn't find Violet anywhere on the property. The people figured

Violet must have gone to the castle to provide a glorious floral display for the funeral. Since she had always said to take what one needed and pay her later, that is exactly what the people did. Mourners coming out of the castle said they had never seen such marvelous floral arrangements at any royal affair.

The people of Crepe kept going back to Violet's Garden to pay their bill, but still never found her there. They did find the small wooden box by Violet's front door where she had said they could insert payments. Now most of the people of Crepe had but the income of the commoner, so Violet often let them pay as they could over time whenever they needed something from her garden. One day, Rachel Davis, when she had just dropped off her payment, saw two royal gardeners coming down the path from the castle. They stopped at Violet's house and began tending to her garden. For two months those gardeners kept Violet's Garden in a condition that would have made Violet proud. The people still had Violet's Garden to pick out their

favorite flowers, but they missed seeing Violet and wondered when she would be back.

More sadness soon fell upon the land. War had broken out and the little village had to relinquish its young men to defend the land. The village knew, though, that the king would do everything he could to keep their sons safe. He would not send them to battle for the sake of pride and power. Unfortunately, the village suffered great economic woe from the war. Most people simply did not have any money to pay Violet, but they knew that even if Violet were there, she would never pressure them for money.

Charlene McMaster walked by Violet's house every day, and whenever she had a penny or two left, she would drop it in the box. She felt a little guilty at times that she couldn't do more, but then she got an idea. Since the war broke out, the two royal gardeners didn't come down anymore, and Violet's Garden began to look kind of neglected. She got together with some of her friends, who were also feeling the same way about not being able to pay their bills. The ladies decided, if they

couldn't pay money, they could pay with their time in keeping the garden in top condition. And Violet's Garden continued to grow and bloom in purple majesty.

As is so often the case, the succeeding generations did not have a connection with Violet and her garden. As those who knew of Violet and what she had meant to the village of Crepe began to pass on. The importance of it all also began to pass on. The little cottage with the purple roof and the purple shutters fell into disrepair and eventually was torn down.

If you should, someday, travel the land in those parts, you will not find any trace of the little cottage with the purple roof and purple shutters, but you will see the magnificent castle still standing. If you walk the grounds of the castle, you will find a small cemetery that contains generations of royalty. In that cemetery, still today, you will find a purple headstone surrounded by a bed of violets. As a backdrop to the headstone, there grows a massive purple flowering vine with the name of *Petrea*

volubilis, or as it is more commonly called,
Queen's Wreath.

ME AND MY QUEEN PALM

WANTED: *Cocos plumosa*, a.k.a. *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*, a.k.a. *Syagrus romanzoffiana*. Sometimes answers to the common name of Queen Palm. Call Jim at 1-555-555-3241.

I saw the above classified in a landscape and gardening magazine a while back. It reminded me of my first encounter with the elegant Queen Palm.

I vividly recall when I was 10 years old and came upon the lavish pile of orange fruit that had dropped from the Queen Palm in our backyard. Without any nudging from any adult, I diligently planted every single one into some old pots that my uncle had been saving for some future project. (I gained his permission first, of course.) *Cocos plumosa* was the first official botanical name I ever learned.

Some fifty years later, I gaze up at the tall, robust specimens lining my sister's driveway. They were a gift from me to her and to this day, I still think they are the healthiest palms I have ever seen. But I am faced with a dilemma. With my hand

patting the sturdy trunks, I simply don't know how to tell these fine palms that they are suffering from an identity crisis. All those fine cousins with shared heredity are only a mirage. What's more, I am not certain I can reassure them that their new kin will still be their kin ten years from now. And so, the question growing in my mind is, 'Why'?

Plant taxonomy is a science, of course. Those engaged in its field have spent a good part of their life and their money achieving the standing of plant taxonomist. It has certainly come a long way since Linnaeus first began the endeavor. I will grant that the more sophisticated science has become, the more it can distinguish between plants. But the sometimes-turbulent disagreement in the inner circle of plant taxonomy fosters a seed of cynicism within the mind.

Plant taxonomy has the function of finding, describing, classifying, identifying, and naming plants. An allied field, called "plant systematics" is concerned with the relationships between plants and their evolution (red flag word and the subject of a whole other weeding session). To a layman, the distinction between the two is blurry.

What variation in classifying systems are there? Pick your flavor—we have the APG,

APG II, APG III, Bessey, Cronquist, Melchior plus a dozen or so less tenured entities. I couldn't tell you what the differences are. It would require someone with fewer weeds in their mind than me. Plant taxonomy is certainly important in an orderly world. There can be a dozen different common names for the same plant, depending on where you live in the world. If I were to call someone in Australia and mention my Queen palm, it would be good to give its botanical name too, so we would be on the same page (of course, I don't know anyone in Australia to call). I just hope I never have to call someone in Australia and talk about the pothos plant on my back porch. This poor “pothos” plant (currently, still *Epipremnum aureum*) has had over 20 different scientific names in its lifetime. Some of these old names are just discarded and no longer considered valid. They keep others on the books and list them as synonyms for the new name. If I were to try texting and include all the names, I might have to take out a loan for data usage charges.

Perhaps the thing to do is find a comfortable lounge chair underneath a live oak tree with a lemonade in hand and give less serious thought to the matter. It is in such a setting that my overly fertile

mind can wander into a little room deep within the bowels of a laboratory complex.

Seven lab coated men sit around a table waiting for their boss to appear. Dr. Zeckle enters with a commanding stride, carrying the assignments for the day.

"Gentlemen," the exalted scientist bellows. "There are no new specimens to examine today. Therefore, it behooves us to look to existing subjects for our day's work. Wimbush, I want you to go back and reclassify and rename *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*."

"But, sir," Wimbush objected. "We did that one a few years ago."

"Are you defying me, Wimbush?"

"Oh, n ... n ... no, no sir," Wimbush stammers. "I couldn't. I wouldn't."

"If you are, may I remind you that Igor is dying to come to life at the first vacancy in our little group. As for the rest of you, here are your assignments."

"Yes, sir," they all replied in unison.

As he walked back to his office, Dr. Zeckle laughed loudly as he proclaimed, "They are mine. Ha! Ha! The entire world is mine. They are powerless to resist my manipulation of their minds. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

I know. I know. I've got to stop reading my Far Side collections.

I also know that, if I were at a party, and the guy I was talking to made a comment about the Queen Palm in the backyard, I could reply with some remark about the *Cocos plumosa* being a graceful tree. That would sound impressive enough, but if I said, " You mean the *Cocos plumosa*, a.k.a. *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*, a.k.a. *Syagrus romanzoffiana*", it could cause severe stress on his part being in such erudite company.

The question then becomes, "Should we, as the planters and tillers of the soil, even care?"

We should, of course, to a point. What do you think?

Now that I've cleared my mind of this weed completely (unless there are dormant seeds deeply buried), I will seek the company of my Queen

Palm on this sultry summer evening. With my hand resting on its sturdy trunk, I will be content in being a peasant in the hierarchy of plant taxonomy and watch the setting of the fiery orange Florida sun.

WPLT TRAFFIC REPORT

Good morning. I'm Dave Flowers with the morning traffic report for WPLT News.

Let's get right to it with a report from down under. For all you water molecule commuters coming from the feeder roots, it's clear making your way to the Xylem Interplant Expressway. Once you get on the expressway, it's smooth sailing up to speed straight through to the downtown foliage area. There is one problem coming off Exit 14 to the right mid-branch. We don't know what's causing the blockage yet. There have been some reports of borer activity in the area, but as soon as we determine what the issue is, we'll let you know. Otherwise, all traffic exiting the Xylem Expressway to the leaf factories via the petioles and vein network is looking good. Watch for the nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium ions when you get around the petiole areas. Those factories will be cranking out the food products in another hour or so, making traffic through the vein network above average.

Jennifer over at WPLT Weather reports no fog in the area. Our eye in the sky, Hummingbird 14, is reporting visibility of about 10 miles with minimal wind, which should keep incoming butterfly traffic from having any problems reaching the nectar refueling ports on the flowers. Transpiration for the water traffic will rise once the temperature gets up to speed. Oxygen traffic coming out of the stomata will also kick up once the light energy reaches a higher level, and the factories start manufacturing.

Traffic near the stem tips should slow way down as the school zones for kid cells are very busy this time of year.

Thanks, Gina. We've just received a bulletin that maintenance crews will be doing work in the upper canopy area today, including some trimming. Be careful to stay away from that area until they're done. Once they have completed their work, you can expect some new routes to be opening soon.

Bee traffic around the flower farms is very heavy right now, as nectar and pollen production is

in full swing. This should last another week or two until the fruit begins to set. Once that happens, look for heavier traffic going to the fruit area, particularly the sugar carriers coming from the leaf factories.

Rain this afternoon will keep the flow of water molecules moving through the root routes. If the fertilizer crews get done with their work before the rain comes, you can expect to see higher than normal ion movement through the root feeder routes in the days following.

With rain levels being steady this time of year, stomata have remained fully open for a smooth inflow of carbon dioxide molecules.

A few exits off the Phloem Expressway are experiencing some slowdowns as starch molecules are starting to bunch up in the pith regions.

Okay, just in. There is some garden police activity on Branch 34. Webworms are causing extensive damage to the leaf factories in that area. We advise all nutrient vehicles to avoid that area until

they clear the webs. The garden police don't waste any time with these guys.

Our underground monitors are detecting some stop 'n go traffic near the root hairs in Section 31. Gina, do you have any information yet on what that is? ... Okay, not yet. I'm betting it's nematode probing, but we'll update when it becomes clearer.

Yeah, go ahead, Carl. A detour ... okay, there is a detour in the older section of town. Nutrient flow is being redirected around the chloroplasts and into the red and gold processing plants. Isn't it a little early for that, Carl? Yeah, I suppose it could be an early winter this year. Thanks, Carl, keep us updated.

DOT is reporting a construction zone along stem 13. They are doing some air layering work there and should be done in about two hours.

All stolon lanes are open to the outlying communities.

Seed distribution centers are not yet open, so there is very little traffic going to that area. It will

probably be a month or two before we have to worry about that area.

Okay, Gina says the trimming work in the upper canopy that we told you about earlier has now begun. Best estimate is two to three hours, but we'll let you know when it is clear.

Beware in the feeder root routes as they are going to be putting down a granular systemic insecticide tomorrow. Local traffic should consider those compounds as tourists and cut them some slack as they try to figure out where they're going.

Well, that about wraps it up for this segment. We'll be on remote from the flower fields at noon, so we'll see you then. Of course, if there are any emergencies that come up, we'll cut in and get that information to you.

DUCKS AND FRIENDS IN A NURSERY

Owning a plant nursery can be a risky business. Given the whims of Mother Nature, the appetites of a textbook full of insects, and the weeds that think they're marketable horticultural wonders, it can bring many a furrowed brow. If you manage to make a living at it, growing and selling plants can be a very satisfying career.

Occasionally, a place in the country will provide distractions beyond the challenges of growing plants. Considering that fact, I offer below a few of those distractions to well, uh ... distract you from the daily grind of life inside the plant arena.

Friends of my brother, when they discovered the two cute little ducklings that they bought for their kids soon became rather messy pool guests, offered the cute little fellas (ducks, not kids) as potential workers in the nursery. After all, we had a large pond as our water reservoir, and Inky and Speedy possessed fine skills as far as ducks go.

Somewhere in the negotiations, we agreed to provide them room and board for their alleged services. Inky, as you may surmise, was black and Speedy, as you may also surmise, was fast on his feet. While their resumes detailed all the advantages of tenant ducks, they neglected to mention the incessant quacking for a hearty breakfast prior to actually doing any work. It didn't matter that I had to get workers (humans, not ducks) started. They stood outside my pickup truck door as I opened it, and vociferously reminded me of my part of the bargain. Apparently, in their minds, if they were first in line, then they should receive first service. Once I realized the futility of trying to ignore them, I began carrying a couple of cups of duck food in the truck to give them as soon as I arrived.

Once fed, the duo headed for the pond to inspect the pump, piping, and intake screen—at least that's what they always said they were going to do. Sometimes when I'd get back to the pond to check on things myself, I would find them on the edge of the pond doing some preening and relaxing. It must

have been in the fine print that I didn't read, but I didn't realize just how many duck breaks came as a requirement in their contracts. They insisted that the time they took for breaks fell within industry standards.

My son was just a toddler at the time of Inky and Speedy. One of the more memorable scenes of their relationship came after lunch one Saturday when my wife and son came for a visit. The five of us (me, my wife, my son, Inky, and Speedy) took a leisurely stroll down one path leading through the plant beds. Suddenly, Inky and Speedy made a bee-line for something ahead of us. The image of two ducks waddling as fast as they could go with my son waddling right behind them is forever planted in my mind.

A few months later, Inky and Speedy had three of their geese cousins come for a visit to the farm. Apparently, they were not familiar with Ben Franklin's old saying, "Fish and visitors stink after three days". Fortunately, we had a very big pond. The big male goose had an attitude problem, though. He must have felt my presence was an

intrusion upon his goosedom. He constantly nipped at the back of my leg whenever I got nearby. It wasn't so bad when he hit below the top of my boots, but it could hurt on the calf. One day I had enough. I turned around and kicked him—not hard enough to hurt him, but enough to gain his respect. We became 'Best Buds' thereafter.

Our neighbor on one side had a German Shepherd, and our neighbor on the other side had a black Labrador. These two got together, and the result was six puppies. I guess because our nursery was middle ground, they opted to rent space underneath our office trailer. Obviously, they came off as too cute and that seriously affected the rental rate. One little brown puppy was a shy one. When all the others came charging out from their residence, he would stay under and peer out for a long time to make sure nothing scary loomed outside. One by one, their human owners found them permanent homes, which was probably all for the best. I did miss coaxing the shy one out as a distraction from the challenge of the plants for quite a while.

Not too long after we started building beds and getting drainage pipe installed, we bought a bunch of plants from a nursery that had gone out of business. Some of the material was really too tropical for our area, but it all came in one package. When a severe winter storm approached, I moved as much inside as I could and decided to leave the sprinklers running on the rest hoping to save as much as possible. The bed under sprinkler became a winter wonderland, rarely seen in our section of Florida. With the coming of first light, ice statues drew countless visitors and cameras. Of course, we lost everything under the sprinkler, but we generated a lot of publicity for a long time.

One morning, I started up the forklift and moved it over to the potting area to load up a bunch of trees we had just moved to larger pots. I lifted up the first pot of the group and put it on the pallet that was on the forks. I turned back around to see a huge Diamondback Rattlesnake all coiled up among the pots and fast asleep. My commotion didn't wake him at all. Somewhere in my mind, I recall some sage advice about not waking a

sleeping rattlesnake when he's only two feet away from you. Quietly stepping back, I grabbed an empty metal pot, turned it upside down, and gingerly set it on top of the snake. Then I added five bags of fertilizer on top to weigh it down. The pot had drain holes near the top, so I knew the snake could breathe. A neighbor down the road worked for the Fish and Wildlife Commission, so I called him, and he sent someone out. They successfully captured the snake and took him to a less populated area. Believe it or not, he slept through the whole ordeal. He measured about eight feet long and had beautiful coloring. I marveled at the magnificence of the creature, but I did not regret his departure.

Since we're on the subject of snakes, we had an old dump truck that I used to move dirt around while building the nursery growing beds. One day I got into the truck and started it up. Suddenly, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye coming from underneath the dash on the passenger side. Then I heard a thud as something dropped onto the passenger side floor. A confused Cottonmouth Water Moccasin tried to figure out what had just

happened. I had no confusion in my mind as to a quick exit from the truck. From a safe distance, I watched to see if the snake would also decide to exit the truck. When he did, I made a lot of noise inside the cab of the truck to make sure he didn't have any friends still inside. Then I pulled the truck up to the shop and plugged up every hole where anything could possibly get inside the cab. I never did figure out how that big snake got in there.

Another time, one of our workers decided to do a little fishing down at the pond on his lunch break. When I saw him coming back up the path from the pond, I could see he had something on the end of his line, but he was a little too far away to see what it was. As he got closer, I saw that he had caught a two-foot-long alligator. My first thought was to look behind him to see if mama gator was following him. Fortunately, the little fella must have been running away from home, because I never saw another alligator on the property in all the years we were there.

There were many other critters that the ducks must have invited for a visit (I certainly didn't

invite them). Among them were armadillos, skunks, a woodchuck, wild turkeys, wild boars, and deer. I would often complain to the ducks about all the visitors, but they seldom listened.

As far as all the distractions, I eventually learned to watch every step I took and just live with them (and, of course, write about them later).

SHADOWS OF A FULL MOON

Billy Gardner came from a long line of gardeners. He doesn't know when the family name got shortened to Gardner, but he reckoned it must have been when somebody misspelled it somewhere along the way. With his knowledge of plants and his gardening skills, he quickly rose up the ranks to the position of head gardener at Pine Valley Cemetery, one of the oldest burial grounds in the state.

As a business, Pine Valley Cemetery proved to be a very lucrative endeavor, making plenty of money for its owners for over four generations. Originally about twenty acres at the far end of a valley, the owners were fortunate in that the land surrounding the cemetery became available in various parcels over the years. So, about the only thing restricting profits remained a healthy, living population. As part of their marketing strategy, they liked to emphasize that Pine Valley was so beautiful that you could hardly wait to live there.

Billy's skills with gardening were a vital part of keeping the landscape beautiful. The owners recognized that and gave him a generous budget. The original sections of the cemetery had many fine old specimens of plants and trees. Billy liked the challenge of blending the new landscape with the old. He also prided himself on getting a new burial plot covered so quickly that the ground looked like it had never been disturbed.

One early spring day, when the ground had thawed enough to dig graves, Billy ran into a problem. It had been a brutal winter, and unfortunately, an abnormal number of people had passed away. Billy had to work his crew hard and long into the night to get everything covered. On that particular night, a full moon shone brightly from the eastern sky.

At about ten o'clock that night, two of Billy's crew came running back to the maintenance barn.

"Boss, you gotta come see this," said Tommy McCall. "There's things goin on out there."

"What's going on, Tommy?" asked Billy.

“Something’s making weird noises and the trees ... the trees ... there’s strange creatures hanging round the trees,” added Johnny Rowe.

“Okay, calm down, boys,” said Billy. “We’ll go out and have a look.” He thought to himself, “They’re just kids and have probably never been in a cemetery at night.”

“It’s out there by those big oak trees,” said Tommy. “We were covering up old man Jones in their family plot when it started happening. Don’t you want to take a gun or something?”

“No, let’s just have a look first,” said Billy.

When Billy and the boys got back to the Jones’ section, it was deathly quiet. The air at night was still a little crisp and they could see their breath in the moonlight.

“What kind of noise did you boys hear?” asked Billy.

“It was kinda like a crunchy sound,” said Tommy. “Kinda like someone walking on dead

leaves, but there ain't no more dead leaves on the ground. We raked them up a long time ago."

"What did those strange creatures look like?" asked Billy.

"We didn't actually see the creatures, boss," said Tommy. "But we seen their shadows. They was always hiding behind them trees."

"Well, what did their shadows look like?" prodded their boss.

"They had big bodies, long, thin crooked arms, and no heads," answered Johnny.

"Boys, boys, boys. What you saw was the shadows of the trees from that full moon up there. Look at those oaks. Without any leaves, they look exactly like what you saw."

"Whatta you think, Johnny?" asked Tommy.

"Well, it could have been, I guess," replied Johnny. "But some of them shadows were following us when we run back here. What about them, boss? They weren't no tree shadows."

“What you probably saw was your own shadows as you ran,” said Billy.

“From the moonlight?” asked Johnny.

“Yes,” said Billy.

“I don’t know ... maybe it could have been,” said Tommy.

“What about that crunching sound?” asked Johnny.

“It was probably just some animal rummaging around in those pine needles that we just put out as mulch in the new flower bed.”

“Musta just been the moonlight,” said Tommy.

“Yeah ... the moonlight,” added Johnny.

About the time that Billy had Tommy and Johnny reassured that there were no strange creatures out there, two more of his crew came running over to where they were.

“Boss, you gotta come see something,” said Matt Walker. “There’s something really strange going on where we was working.”

“Okay, okay, Matt. Let’s go.”

“It’s right over there, boss,” said Jack Thomas. “Right over there on the ground.”

“All I see is the shadow of that old sycamore tree, guys.”

“Ya gotta get closer, boss,” said Matt.

Sure enough. As the five of them got closer to the tree, the ground danced with movement.

“That’s just us, guys,” said Billy. “Look, I raise my arms, and the shadow raises its arms. See.”

“It’s just the moonlight,” said Tommy, as if speaking from authority.

“Yeah ... okay,” said Jack. “But even before we got close, you could hear the tree talking.”

“Talking?” asked Billy. “What did it say?”

“I swear it said ‘Nevermore’, boss,” said Matt. “Ain’t that right, Jack?”

“Yeah, you remember that time your sister told us about ...”

“It was probably just some old raven, guys,” interrupted Billy. “They make nests down in hollow branches all the time.”

“Yeah, it was probably just the moonlight,” added Johnny.

“An old raven,” said Matt. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Okay, boss,” said Jack. “But what we seen next weren’t no old raven.”

“What’s that, Jack?” asked Billy.

“The Samuel Newsom grave where we’re supposed to be laying the new sod, well ... what we seen was this misty kinda creature come up out of the ground and pick up two pieces of sod off the pallet and lay them on the ground.”

“Sounds like a ghost to me,” said Tommy.

“You ever seen a ghost before?” asked Johnny.

“No, but I know you can’t take no picture of them,” replied Tommy. “And I know that ghosts don’t have no shadow.”

“Who told you that, Tommy?” asked Johnny.

“This photographer what took the pictures at my cousin Elbert’s wedding,” answered Tommy.

“Come on, boys,” said Billy. “Let’s go up to the grave and have a look.”

As they got closer to the gravesite, Jack said, “Look, boss. There’s those two pieces of sod on the ground.”

“Samuel Newson?” asked Tommy. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Wasn’t he the head gardener of this place a long time ago?” questioned Johnny. “Yeah, old Hard Man Sam. That’s what they used to call him. My daddy worked for him for a while. Daddy always said Hard Man Sam was a hard man to work for. He always had to have everything done just

like he wanted it and usually ended up doing it himself.”

“Yeah ... seems like I remember my daddy talking about him, too,” said Jack. “They used to say that when he died, they wouldn’t need any headstone. His head was so hard that they could just bury him with his head out of the ground and it would last longer than any old stone.”

“Whoa ... boss,” exclaimed Matt. “Would you look at that. That ghost is coming back up outta the ground and he’s grabbing another piece of sod.”

“Is that a ghost, boss?” asked Johnny.

“It’s ... it’s probably just the moonlight,” said Tommy.

“Okay, guys, we need to call it a night,” said Billy. “I think we’re all so tired, we’re just seeing things. Let’s get on back to the barn and go home.”

“Amen to that, boss,” said Matt.

The following morning Billy took Matt and Jack back to the Newsom gravesite. Knowing that they might still be a little spooked, he wanted to

help them get started. When they came up to it, the three just stood there, frozen on their feet. The new sod now completely covered the gravesite. Billy finally walked over to take a closer look. Whoever did the work did an excellent job. The installer left no gaps or pieces overlapped, and they did a good job contouring the edges to fit the existing border grass. With all the little patch pieces well cut and fitted, it was a professional job and far better than he had seen any of his crews do.

“Look, boss,” said Matt. “There’s a machete sticking up outta the leftover sod on the pallet.”

“Okay, boys, I can’t explain this, but we’ve got lots of work to do. So, let’s move on over to the new section where we’ve got three sites to cover.”

“Okay, boss,” said Jack. Turning to Matt, he said, “I hope there ain’t no ghosts over there.”

Later in the morning, Billy took the forklift back to the Newsom site to pick up the leftover sod and move it to the new section. When he reached the site, he found the machete gone from the pallet and now sticking in the ground in front of Samuel

Newsom's headstone. He got down off the forklift and went over to retrieve the machete. Pulling on the machete handle, he couldn't get it to come out of the ground. He tried rocking it back and forth, but it still wouldn't budge. After about ten minutes of tugging, his hands started to hurt. He pulled out his little notepad from his shirt pocket and wrote down, 'Buy a new machete'. Then he got back on the forklift and started to leave. He momentarily stopped the machine and pulled out his notepad again. He wrote, 'Make sure the Samuel Newsom gravesite gets the VIP treatment with maintenance'.

As he pulled away, he cast a final look at the grave and said to himself, "It must have just been the moonlight."

DAYS OF OUR GARDENS

Yesterday we learned that Jennifer and Rick had split up after Rick sent her a dozen red roses. Her last words were, “He knows I wanted pink.”

Word, today, is that Rick is dating the new cashier at the garden center and Jennifer has fallen in love with a seed salesman she met at the flower and garden festival.

Meanwhile, Harry is in serious trouble. He sent a load of manure to his wife with a card addressed to his girlfriend and a new wheelbarrow to his girlfriend with a card addressed to his wife. He’s going to have a tough time explaining that to both of them. His best friend, Marvin, made the comment after bringing Harry’s wife home from the movies that, “He’s in deep ****, literally and figuratively”. Marvin has always had a way with words, at least that’s what Marilyn, his new girlfriend, said Saturday night.

We now join Madge and Linda under the oak tree in Madge’s backyard.

“Linda, I am so bored with my landscape,” said Madge.

“I know what you mean, Madge,” replied Linda. “I was just saying that to Frank the other night.”

“Frank?” questioned Madge. “I thought your boyfriend’s name was Tom.”

“Oh, that was last week, Madge. A limb broke off my bottlebrush tree in that windstorm last week, and I had to call in a tree surgeon. Here’s his card.”

“Frank Wickham, P.D.?” asked Madge. “What’s the P.D. mean?”

“Plant Doctor, silly.”

“Do you think he could help me with my landscape?” asked Madge.

“Oh, honey, there are a lot of things he could help you with. He helped me in more ways than one, if you get my drift.”

“Drift?” asked Madge. “Isn’t that a new kind of rose?”

“Madge, Madge, Madge. One of these days we’re going to have to have a long talk.”

The following week, Frank Wickham, P.D., came to Madge’s home to look at the broken limb on her live oak.

“Just let me have a look at it, ma’am,” said Frank.

“Please, call me Madge.”

“That’s odd, Madge. You said this limb broke off in the bad windstorm a few weeks ago?”

“Yes, will my poor baby live?”

“What’s odd about this is that it looks like someone tried cutting into this with a saw and the weight of the limb broke it the rest of the way.”

“Can you save it?” asked Madge, with her eyes fluttering.

“Saving lives is my business,” answered Frank. “I’ll have it repaired in a jiffy.”

“After you get it fixed, will you take me to lunch?” asked Madge.

“I’m sorry, Madge, but I’m due over at the Gardens Hospital set. Abigail’s *Neoregelia* ‘Passion’ has offsets that are ready to go, and it requires my fine surgical hands to perform the separation procedure. Perhaps another time.”

“Will you come back, Frank?” asked Madge. “If I saw ... I mean if we have another windstorm and another limb breaks?”

“I will always have time for a beautiful tree and a beautiful lady,” answered Frank.

The next day Madge called her friend, Linda.

“Linda, you were so right. Frank is dreamy. You’re so lucky.”

“Frank and I are old news, Madge. My dog didn’t take to him, so I dumped him.”

“I’m so sorry, Linda,” said Madge, somewhat unconvincingly.

“That’s okay, Madge. I took my dog to the doctor yesterday and now I’m seeing that new veterinarian they have there. He’s gorgeous.”

In another part of town, Maxine DeVry and her friends, Jane and Martha, are having lunch at Vito's Café.

"I am so depressed," said Maxine.

"What's the matter, Maxine?" asked Jane.

"It's my lawn," answered Maxine.

"What about your lawn?" asked Martha.

"I just found out that my Cashmere Zoy-siagrass doesn't produce viable seed," replied Maxine. With more tears than the finest theatrical performance, Maxine just seemed beside herself.

Giving her a hug, Martha said, "It's okay, Maxine. Just let it out. We will always be here for you."

"Yes, dear sweet Maxine," said Jane. "We will always keep you in our thoughts."

"Thank you," managed Maxine. "You are such dear friends. I must get to my plant psychologist to see if there is anything I can do for my lawn in this dreadful situation."

“Please be careful driving over there, Maxine,” said Jane.

“Yes, goodbye,” said Maxine.

After Maxine left the restaurant, Jane said to Martha mockingly, “Oh, I’ve just found out my Cashmere Zoysiagrass doesn’t produce viable seed.”

“Oh, whatever shall I do,” added Martha.

“Serves her right,” said Jane. “Always bragging about her lawn, saying she feels sorry for anybody with a mere St. Augustinegrass yard.”

“Maybe it’ll bring her down a notch or two to us common lawn owners,” added Martha.

Meanwhile, over at John’s Garden Center, Sid Frazer sees his friend, Bob Porter, in the adjacent aisle.

“Hey, Bob. Long-time no see.”

“Yeah, man, it has been a while,” said Bob.

“Doing a little landscaping, Bob?” asked Sid.

“Yeah, I had to come get a few more Liriope to finish along the front walk. I’ve got a potential buyer coming tomorrow and I’m desperate to get the house sold.”

“Is something going on?” asked Sid. “Why are you so desperate to move?”

“Well, we’ve been friends for a long time, so this is just between me and you, okay?”

“What’s going on, buddy?”

“Well, I got into a little trouble with my garden gazebo business, and I had to borrow some money.”

“Okay, Bob. So, you had to borrow a little money.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly from a traditional lender,” said Bob.

“Who gave you the money, Bob?”

“Frankie G.”

“Frankie G., the bookie?” asked Sid.

“Yeah. If I don’t have the money for him by the end of the week, I’ll be in big trouble.”

“Big trouble, like Johnny G., his brother, the enforcer?”

“Yeah, so you see why I’m kind of desperate to sell the house to get the money to pay him off.”

“I’ll follow you home and help you get these Liriope planted,” said Sid. “Have you got a will?”

That is all we have time for today. Will the next episode bring an end to Bob’s troubles? Will Harry be returning for another program? Will Linda keep her new boyfriend for more than a week? Will Maxine ever resolve her turfgrass reproductive issue? Tune in tomorrow for another exciting episode of ‘Days of Our Gardens’.

A PLOT OF ROSES

Jean LeClerc and his family lived on a fifty-acre plot of land near the coast of France across from England. As a third-generation nurseryman on the land, he felt proud to raise roses as his life's work. Numerous hybrids bore the names of family members over the years from their rose breeding program.

Naturally, with such a history, Jean became a patriot and fierce defender of French life and values. With two brothers already killed by the Nazi war machine, he struggled to figure out how he could fight and still preserve the family legacy. One dark, cloudy day in April, there came a knock on his office door.

"Jean LeClerc?" asked the woman wearing a dark overcoat.

"Yes," replied Jean.

"Monsieur LeClerc, my name is Heather Lebeau. My friends and I rescued your brother

Charles from the Nazi soldiers. We did everything we could to save him, but he had lost too much blood. Before he died, he asked me to kneel down beside him. He whispered in my ear that should we ever need anything, we must come to you. We have to be so very careful in these times who we trust or talk to, but this came from the mouth of a dying, loyal French soldier and patriot.”

“I appreciate what you did for my brother, Heather ... You must be very tired from your journey. Can I get you anything, food or wine?”

“Yes, monsieur. I would be most grateful for that.”

“How can I be of help to you, Heather?”

“My friends and I are with the French Underground. We desperately need a haven over here on the coast. In his dying breath, your brother also said you were a loyal patriot to France. We wondered if you would consider providing such a haven for us here on your farm?”

“What would this haven require of me and my family?”

“We need a place to set up a relay station for sending messages to the allies. Your farm would be an ideal place to set that up and enable us to radio our messages to London.”

“I understand how the farm with its setting on the land is situated for such an undertaking, but what makes you think the Nazis wouldn’t find it in short order?”

“There is no guarantee, monsieur, but how your brother bragged of your ingenuity leads me to believe we could figure out a way to outfox them.”

“Well, Heather, what you ask could be very dangerous ... but, of course, I will help you. Let me think. We must plot this out. Are your friends with you?”

“Yes, monsieur. They are waiting in the woods.”

“Good, you go get them and come back. We will give you room for the night.”

“Thank you, monsieur.”

“Please, no more monsieur. It is to be Jean, okay?”

“Yes, Jean.”

Two weeks passed since that first night and Jean had managed to redo part of his wine cellar underneath the house as a hiding place and radio center. With Heather and her friends to help, they dug a tunnel from the wine cellar to the potting shed. Members of the Underground would come each day as workers in the nursery. They would enter the potting shed and two would go through the tunnel to the radio center in the wine cellar. From there, they could get word to London of targets and troop movements. The plan seemed to work well when one day Heather brought the news of a Nazi radio truck in the area. They were searching for the source of radio broadcasts that the truck had detected in the area. They shut the radio center down immediately without letting London know why.

“Jean, we have to figure out a way to get this information to London without the radio,” said Heather.

“I agree, that we must do,” replied Jean. “Let me think and we will get together for work in the morning as usual.”

When morning came, so did a new plot from Jean’s mind.

“First, Heather, we must get word to London about the radio and about our new plan. Do you still have a courier who makes it over there sometimes?”

“Yes, Jean. It is risky, but if we must, we can still do it. Father Pierre at the church in town is our coordinator for the couriers.”

“Good, then this is what we will do, first. We will put the message into a thin tube and insert it into the hollowed-out stem of a long-stemmed rose. That rose will be part of an arrangement that is delivered to the church for the altar. If we use long-stemmed roses, Father Pierre can cut them just above the tube and everything will seem as it should be.”

“What is your plan, Jean?” asked Louis, a leader of the group.

“I have a hillside at the far end of the property that faces England. I will plant that hillside with roses in a distinct pattern according to Morse code. The roses will go into the ground with their pots so we can easily move them around. When we have a location to bomb, the planes from London can fly over our place and see the plantings of Morse code, so to speak. The planes will then know exactly where to bomb. It will take a little experimenting to make sure they can read the dots and dashes of the plantings, but I feel confident it will work.”

“What if the Nazis come?” asked Louis. “Will they not see it also?”

“You would not be able to see the pattern easily from the ground,” answered Jean. “Of course, it is always possible that one of their planes might see it from the air. But if they do not know what they are looking for, I believe it will be difficult to distinguish between the general nursery and the countryside. Besides, my friend, this is war, and we are all taking risks. I will devise an explanation for the odd plantings as a backup should anyone question

it. And should that not work, I will have a quick exit strategy for me and my family.”

“I believe it will work, Louis,” said Heather. “I believe we must try.”

“Yes, we must try, Heather,” said Louis.

With everyone’s help in planting the test plot and with the aid of a spotter plane from the RAF, they managed to get out the first message - a simple ‘Can you read this’. The pilot tipped his wings several times to let them know he could read their message. At one o’clock in the morning, Heather turned the radio on and broadcast one chime from a grandfather’s clock and then quickly turned the radio off. That one chime let London know of a new message on the hillside.

For two months, the French Underground sent messages that saved countless lives and led to the destruction of many valuable targets. On the first day of the third month, Jean LeClerc opened the door to a Nazi officer and his two guards. He informed Jean that they were taking over his rose farm to grow food for the German soldiers.

“But please, sir,” pleaded Jean. “I have lived here all my life and my family before me for two generations. Is there not something we can do?”

“Well ... if you wish to cooperate with us and accept the inevitable domination of The Third Reich, then ... I suppose, if you would farm the land for us, then I suppose ... I suppose we could allow you to stay on the land.”

“Yes. Yes. I would do that.”

“You understand that we will have to destroy all the roses, and replant the farm with food crops?”

“Yes, I understand. But if you would allow me one acre on that hillside where nothing will grow, I could still have some roses and grow plenty of food on the good land.”

“If there is one thing I can’t stand, it’s a begging Frenchman,” said the Nazi officer. “Very well, one acre of land on the hillside for your precious roses.”

“Thank you, sir. If I might offer a little bonus for your kindness in that regard. I could see that

fresh roses are delivered to your wife or girlfriend every week. And I could send some to the Führer as well. It could gain you good credit to give the Führer another example of German excellence from afar.”

“That is very wise of you,” said the officer. “For a Frenchman.”

“I merely acknowledge superiority when I see it,” replied Jean.

“I am not a farmer,” said the officer. “But I must ask why you plant the hillside so erratically.”

“Sir, my family has been on this land for a long time. That hillside is far too rocky to grow anything. We have used it as a holding area for plants that we sell. The areas you see empty are where the rock is so close to the surface that the only thing that will grow there is the native grass. Where you see the roses planted is merely the areas where the rock is deeper, and we can temporarily plant the potted roses until we ship them.”

Jean’s bargaining with the Nazi officer allowed their mission to continue for another two

months. Sadly, their mission came to an end one fateful day in September. A German spy had infiltrated the highest levels of Allied intelligence and came to learn of the plot of roses. Nazi soldiers came to the farm and executed Jean LeClerc and his entire family. The members of the French Underground managed to escape into the woods. Once the soldiers left, Heather and her friends came back and recovered the bodies of the Leclerc family. While they buried them in a hidden site, Heather vowed they would return their bodies to the farm one day. One dark night the following month, The Underground returned to the farm and with the cover of darkness sprayed all the crops with an herbicide. With their food crop destroyed and with more pressing military problems, the Nazis abandoned the farm. Heather and her friends dug up the caskets of the LeClerc family from their hidden spot and returned them to the only burial plot worthy of their patriotism and sacrifice—the plot of roses at the foot of a hillside facing England.

COLLINSBURG GARDEN SOCIETY

“Welcome, members and guests,” said Eloise Merchant, president of the Collinsburg Garden Society. “We have a number of interesting topics to discuss tonight, so let’s get the business agenda out of the way first. Doris, will you read the minutes of our last meeting, please?”

“Yes, Madam President,” replied Doris. “As you know, as the county librarian, I pride myself on taking accurate notes. Last month’s meeting began ...”

“How many pages of notes are you going to read, Doris?” yelled Harvey Milk bong from the back of the hall.

“I have eighty-four pages of detailed minutes, Harvey. Now, as I was saying ...”

“Madam President, I move that we accept the minutes from the last meeting unread,” yelled Harvey Milk bong from the back of the hall.

“I have a motion on the floor,” said Eloise. “Do I have a second? ... Doris, please note that all members have seconded the motion. All in favor of accepting the minutes from our last meeting, raise your hand. The motion carries unanimously ... except for one gentleman back at the coffee table. Do you have a problem with last month’s minutes, sir?”

“Uh, no,” said the man. “I’m just delivering the donuts and coffee.”

“Very well,” said the president. “Thank you so very much, Doris. What would we ever do without you?”

“Have shorter meetings,” yelled Harvey Milk bong from the back of the hall.

“Order, please,” said Eloise.

“Madeline, would you please give us a treasurer’s report?”

“Yes, Madam President,” answered Madeline. “Our annual plant sale brought in \$174.66 last

week. The permit to hold the plant sale cost \$175.00. Next year we hope to do better ...”

“What about it, mayor?” asked Wilbur Johnson. “Couldn’t you have cut some slack on the permit fee for the town’s own garden society?”

“Yeah,” said many in unison.

“My esteemed friends, voters, and fellow garden society members. Let me congratulate you on your exceptional interest in the affairs of this fine town. I would deem it a pleasure and my civic duty as your elected mayor to answer that astute question. Let me say that I will give all due consideration to the question of remuneration for public services. It is with great dignity that ...”

“I move that we accept the mayor’s explanation without further discussion,” said the man delivering the coffee and donuts.

“Do I have a second?” asked the president.

“Second,” said all, in unison.

“Madam President,” said Doris. “I must note that the man making the motion is not a member of the Collinsburg Garden Society.”

“All those in favor of accepting the mayor’s explanation without further discussion, given that the motion may at some future date be considered invalid, raise your hand.”

All raised their hands, except the man delivering the coffee and donuts.

“Sir, do you have a problem with the motion that you made?” asked Eloise.

“Uh, no ... ma’am. My uncle, the mayor, just reminded me of a few details on my contract for supplying coffee and donuts, so I must abstain.”

“Did you have anything else to report, Madam Treasurer?” asked Eloise.

“Yes, Madame President. After we pay for the coffee and donuts tonight, we will have \$14.32 in our bank account.”

“Thank you, Madeline,” said Eloise. “Do we have any old or new business to bring to the floor?”

The hall fell silent, except for Bob Picos slurping his coffee.

“Yes, Madame President,” said Doris, against a background of groans. “I would like to propose that we sponsor a display at the library for National Gardening Month.”

“Do you have any idea how much that would cost us, Doris?” asked the president.

“I can get all the materials for \$14.30,” answered Doris.

“Madame Treasurer?” asked Eloise.

“We have it,” said Madeline.

A motion was made, seconded, and carried to sponsor a display.

“Anything else?” asked the president. “No ... okay. Now for our educational program this evening, we have Professor Bolivar J. Shagnasty with his insight on the *Chamaedorea microspadix* palm ... Professor.”

“Thank you, Madam President,” said the professor. As your esteemed president said, I will bring

you a portrait of *Chamaedorea microspadix*, also known by its common names of Bamboo Palm and Hardy Bamboo Palm.

The *Chamaedorea microspadix* is a monocot in the Arecaceae family. *Chamaedorea* means ‘a gift near the ground’ and *microspadix* is from the Greek for ‘small’ and ‘flower stalk’. It is caespitose, up to 3 meters erect or leaning and 3 to 5 meters in horizontal breadth. Leaves are pinnate, reduplicate, with slightly drooping, sigmoid leaflets spreading in a single plane and evenly spaced along the rachis, but with broader apical leaflets. They have a tubular sheath that is 20 to 30 centimeters long, oblique apically, densely and longitudinally striate-nerved. The petiole is 15-25 centimeters long, rounded, strong, flat or only slightly grooved. There are 9 or fewer, when the terminal pair is broader, pinnae on each side of the rachis. The pinnae are up to 25 centimeters long and 4-5 centimeters wide, regularly arranged, alternate, lanceolate, sigmoid or falcate, velvety, glaucous or green below. The upper pair of pinnae are often confluent and 2-3 times broader than others, and they have 3

primary nerves, several secondaries and tertiaries. The inflorescences are pendulous, infrafoliar, sometimes breaking through the old persistent sheaths, to 60 centimeters long and branched to one order with 3-6 branches. The peduncles are 10 centimeters long, 8 millimeters wide at base, and 5 millimeters wide at apex. The spherical fruits are 1 centimeter in diameter and orange-red when mature.”

The words flowed from Professor Shagnasty’s golden tongue for quite some time. When the plant intellectual finally finished his oration, the entire room gave him a standing ovation.

“Hey, Bob,” said Harvey. “Did you understand anything that guy said?”

“Not a word. I think he was speaking in a foreign language.”

“Yeah, sounded like Russian to me,” said Harvey. “If we didn’t understand what he was saying, how come we’re standing and clapping?”

“I’m doing it just because I’m glad it’s finally over,” said Bob.

“Yeah, me too, brother.”

“Thank you, Professor Shagnasty, for that inspiring lecture,” said Eloise. “Members, I’m reminding you that Doris will have a complete transcript of Professor Shagnasty’s lecture available on Tuesday. Professor Shagnasty will also be available at the close of the meeting to answer any questions you might have.”

“Do you think we should ask for a translated copy, Bob?” asked Harvey.

“No, man. You don’t want to show your ignorance.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“So, if there are no further ...” said the president.

“Hey, mayor, can we get some jelly-filled donuts next time?” yelled Harvey from the back of the hall.

“My esteemed friends, voters, and fellow garden society members. Let me congratulate you on your exceptional interest in the affairs of this fine

garden society. I would deem it a pleasure and my civic duty as your elected mayor to answer that astute question. Let me say that I will give all due consideration to the question of refreshment contents. It is with great dignity that ...”

“I withdraw the question, Madame President,” yelled Harvey from the back of the hall.

“So, if there are no further questions ... let me remind you that next month our very own Doris will be bringing in some of her Neoregelia for show and tell. We will also be having some surprise treats from Sophie Cruger’s recent trip to Germany ...”

“I hope it’s some of that German beer,” yelled Harvey from the back of the hall.

“As I was saying, surprise treats from Sophie Cruger, and we are most fortunate to have as our guest lecturer, the world famous, Professor Ludwig von Booring. His topic will be “Economic Opportunities in Armadillo Training for Gardeners”. It’s sure to be an exciting meeting. Thank you for coming and enjoy the coffee and donuts.”

MEDVILLE FIGHTING ROSES

As an author with a bent towards human interest stories, I find myself sitting in a well-lit school auditorium with several hundred people. Among those present are community leaders, businessmen and women, school officials—past and present, and a host of other alumni. Everyone has come to this meeting with grave concern over the growing, widespread depression of the town's citizens.

The Medville Fighting Rams have fallen to a new low. The past season saw the high school football team go winless for the tenth straight year. The class of 2000 experienced the last win. The seven years prior had produced four state champions and three runners up. No one actually has a clue on why the collapse occurred. Some think that ineffective leadership has played a large part, but after eight different head coaches in the sad ten-year period, it's hard to put blame there. Some of the more hardcore football fans think that school officials are

putting too much emphasis on academics. Bernie Jackson, a CPA and part-time statistician for a minor league baseball team, did some extensive research on the matter. He concluded that more athletic families have simply stopped having children. It is easy to understand how, in a region of the state that takes high school football very seriously, those who have a strong interest in the sport might suffer undo depression.

I got up out of my seat and just milled around for a while. I heard many other theories being bandied about as people waited for the meeting to start. It certainly seemed like there was plenty of fruit ripe with thought, but without any viable seed for improvement.

As the clock neared the eight o'clock hour, I returned to my seat. The chairman of the meeting called it to order and gave a brief purpose of the meeting. He then opened the floor for discussion. Many vociferous pleas came from the crowd. When the chaos of twenty people talking at once became unbearable, the chairman called for order.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we must have only one person at a time expressing their views,” yelled the chairman.

The small, slightly built man sitting on my right adjusted his glasses and raised his hand.

“Okay, I see a hand,” said the chairman. “Please go ahead, sir.”

“Yes, I propose that we build a new stadium and change the name of the team.”

“That would be wonderful, but the school doesn’t have any money to build a new stadium,” replied the chairman.

“I will pay for the new stadium,” proclaimed the man.

The silence that resulted proved eerie and the rapt attention by the crowd was priceless.

The chairman adjusted his glasses and said, “Wait ... aren’t you Michael Samson?”

Anyone in the auditorium who had not been paying close attention before now, focused their eyes on the man.

Perhaps a brief biography of the man would be in order before I go any further:

Michael Samson owned a huge rose farm on the outskirts of Medville proper. He had gone to high school at Medville some twenty years ago. With his small, slight frame, he definitely did not play football. Academically, he hovered around average. In fact, he didn't really stand out in any area. He was, without a doubt, the shyest kid in his class. Ironically, he didn't win the 'Most Shy' senior superlative because he was so shy that nobody knew him and thus didn't vote for him. When he graduated from high school, he immediately went to work at a plant nursery in Albertville and fell in love with roses. Prudent with his earnings, he eventually decided to start his own rose nursery at his current farm. He became exceptionally good at the business end of it, and the enterprise grew and prospered. He's never really outgrown his shyness, but he figured out how to take advantage of it. While others become distracted by the latest gadget or fad, he has gained the ability to focus. He knows how to read people and how to master the

psychology of potential customers. As his profits continued to grow, he started several allied businesses that he believes will make money, too. Though I never met the man, I had some knowledge of him through a charity group that I work with. Rumor puts his net worth at well over two hundred million dollars.

When the people in the auditorium realized it was Michael making the proposal, they stopped talking and listened.

“Do you mean you would pay for it all?” asked the chairman. “As a gift?”

“Yes, completely,” answered Michael. “With one condition. The school would have to change its name to the Medville Fighting Roses.”

As you can imagine, the murmuring throughout the crowd grew steadily louder—some laughter, some dismay, some outrage.

“We are already the laughingstock of the state,” said the mayor. “A name like that would only make it worse.”

“We need a name that would give our fine school respect,” said the school principal.

“Yes, it would be hard to teach our team to be tough with roses on their uniforms,” said the football coach.

There were others, though, that knew of Michael’s ability to analyze people. They called for quiet so Michael could explain.

“The man standing next to me is from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service,” said Michael. “Mr. Chairman, if you will let Officer MacDonald have access to your monitor screen, I believe you will find what he has to show you interesting.”

“Sure, come on up, sir,” replied the chairman.

“The video you are about to see is one that I captured on one of my patrols in the mountains,” said Officer MacDonald.

As the video began, Officer MacDonald continued, “As you can see, that is a very large, powerful male mountain lion. In just a minute, he will

begin chasing a rabbit down the slope. At the bottom of the slope, the rabbit just slips under some brush. The mountain lion's momentum carries him into the brush. That brush is a very thick bramble of wild roses ... as you can see, the cat gets caught in the thorny roses. He tries with everything he's got to get out, but he's stuck and bleeding from all the thorns. At that point, I called headquarters to have them send out a vet. While I waited, I shot the cat with a tranquilizer dart and began pruning a path into the cat. Just as I finished clearing out a path, the vet arrived, and we pulled the cat out of the bramble. The vet treated all the wounds, and we waited till the cat woke up to make sure he was okay.

The second video is of a momma bear chasing away another bear from her young cubs. The intruder bear comes across a bramble of wild roses in the chase and quickly changes direction going parallel to the bramble."

"Thank you, Officer MacDonald," said Michael. "Ladies and gentlemen, those roses got the best of a large mountain lion and the bear changed

direction to avoid the thorny roses—I would call that respect. Yes, it is an out-of-the-box approach. I believe we can harness such thought and use it to generate a winning spirit.”

Eerie silence came upon the hall once more.

“It’s going to be a hard sell to the school board and community in general,” said the mayor.

“I don’t have to sell it, mayor,” said Michael. “If you want to see a change, you who are gathered here tonight will have to sell it. I can provide the vehicle for change, but you will have to decide if you want to drive it.”

“I like it,” said the head football coach. “We could use that video as an inspirational tool.”

“Does anyone else have a comment or another idea?” asked the chairman. “No ... okay then I will take this to the school board and run it by them. I think we should give Mr. Samson a big round of applause for his generous offer.”

Fast forward one year and the Medville Fighting Roses play their first home game in the

new stadium. Though they lost their first two games, they didn't lose them by much. Michael Samson didn't limit his support solely to the stadium either. He had all kinds of promotional deals going on, including a free long-stemmed rose for every lady in attendance. His marketing skills made the game a hometown celebration and filled the stadium. The opposing team for the game was the number two ranked team in the state, and most sports talking heads saw fit to label it a probable massacre. When the visiting team began taunting them and making fun of their name, it made the home team players mad ... well, I guess you could say, fighting mad. They were the Medville Fighting Roses, and they hadn't had that spirit for a long time. The #2 powerhouse visiting team won the game and according to many of those prognosticators it was still a blowout with the final score 31 to 30. A movement had begun, from the lowest player on the bench to the starting team to the citizens in the stands to the guy selling concessions. Medville won four of its last seven games and people in the barber shop and the hardware store and the grocery store began talking about next year.

Michael Samson felt he still had things to do. As it happens, he built a new factory in town to manufacture all kinds of metal and wood gardening products. Of course, he needed many new managers and workers to run the business. If he interviewed someone from out of town and they had equal qualifications with others applying for the job and if ... in the course of the interview, he discreetly asked about family and if the applicant happened to have a son who played football and if ... they would agree to live in Medville and if ... they would agree to go to Medville schools, he might give special consideration to those ‘ifs’.

The following season started out with a rollicking victory over the former #2 ranked team. Scott Isaacson, son of one of Michael’s plant managers, threw for five touchdown passes. Brad Tolleson, son of one of the company drivers, ran for 232 yards on the ground. The defensive line formed a thick barrier to any of the opposing team’s offensive efforts. With the stadium filled to capacity with inspired and confident hometown folks, the depressive leanings of the town disappeared.

The whole town of Medville was grateful to the rose grower on the outskirts of town. They wanted to erect a statue of him at the entrance to the stadium, but he didn't want to be in the lime-light. And while Michael's generous actions greatly inspired the town, it turned out the actions of the town greatly inspired Michael. He turned that inspiration into breeding a series of roses that, contrary to most goals of rose breeding, had the fiercest thorns, the toughest, thickest growth, and yet with the flowers of the most profuse floribundas. Of course, Michael's series of roses came to be called Medville Fighting Roses, and today they line the entire outer border of the high school football stadium.

HARRY BAXTER'S LAWN

With scissors in hand, Harry Baxter walked to the property line of his neighbor on the left side. Mind you, these aren't ordinary scissors. They are professional grade, heavy duty, comfort grip, stainless steel, tailor's scissors. Kneeling down at the road, he faced the brick border installed on the property line. Making his way down the bricks, he carefully trimmed each runner of Floratam St. Augustinegrass that attempted to cross the boundary into his yard. To be fair, he did the same for any of his Empire Zoysiagrass that attempted to go into his neighbor's yard. The average homeowner might consider this chore a once-a-week deal that's done when they mow the lawn and run the power string-trimmer. Harry was old school, preferring the hand tool that a true artist would employ and attending to the chore on a daily basis.

Another daily chore that occupied Harry's retirement years was "walking the grass". As an ex-Master Chief in the Navy, Harry believed in the importance of inspection. The daily grass inspection

involved a careful, methodical grid work pattern. The slightest enemy (weed) who dared to invade Harry's lawn received an immediate death sentence. Harry dealt with any fire ant brigade that even thought about starting construction in quick order.

Now, Harry was getting on in years and his legs were starting to go, so it forced him to hire out the mowing work. This frustrated him greatly. The boys down at the Ridgeview Bar & Grill would get an earful of lawn mowing blues every time it was mowing day. Not only did he complain about not being able to mow himself anymore, but he complained loudly about the cost of paying someone else to do it. He had to pay money for someone to fertilize, mow the grass, and maintain the sprinkler system so that his Empire would stay healthy and continue to grow bountifully. Then he had to pay more because his healthy grass grew so fast that it required mowing more often. With the Empire Zoysia, it just looked a whole lot better if the clippings were collected, bagged and hauled away. Of course, he complained about having to pay more

for that, too. Then he had to pay more fees at the county landfill for the disposal of the clippings.

Yes, the boys at the Ridgeview Bar & Grill sometimes grew tired of Harry's complaining. One of them, anonymously of course, sent Harry a letter offering to sell him some goats. The letter hailed what the goats could do in reducing mowing costs. It could evolve into a part-time business, even. When winter came around and the need to mow so often waned, the goats could go to market and bring a profit. Then you could bring in a new batch in the spring. As soon as Harry began talking about goats at the Bar & Grill, some of the boys could hardly contain their laughter. When they realized that Harry was serious, though, they began thinking about all the new complaining he might do, and the humor wore thin.

When other lawns in the neighborhood started to look unkempt, you might think Harry would complain to the Homeowners Association about it, but he never did. It only made him more fastidious than ever to keep his yard in perfect condition. The lawn at 324 Oak Street stood like a

lighthouse for all to see. One neighbor called it the presidential palace of grass. Should you be walking down the street and see Harry working on his lawn, you might stop, stand at attention, and salute. Another neighbor once remarked that of all the turfgrasses available to plant, Harry chose a Zoysiagrass named Empire.

Be forewarned, though, that should you not be able to contain yourself and you feel compelled to ask Harry a question about his lawn, you could have a problem. Harry would consider that an opening to talk about all the virtues and maxims regarding grass ownership. You might hear things like:

Turfgrass acts as a natural filter, reducing pollution by purifying the water passing through its root zone.

A well-maintained lawn and landscape can add up to 15% to the value of a house.

Eight healthy front lawns have the cooling effect of 70 tons of air conditioning, enough to cool 16 homes.

2,500 square feet of well-maintained turfgrass will release enough oxygen to meet the needs of a family of four every day.

And so on ...

In the end, if you are an average homeowner, never expect to have a lawn as magnificent as Harry Baxter's. You can't do it, unless you own a professional grade, heavy duty, comfort grip, stainless steel, tailor's scissors and have plenty of time on your hands. Even then, you may not be able to do it. You can, however, do the best you can do with the grass you've got. A little sweat and plenty of good old common sense will carry you through most issues. If you begin to suffer the summer doldrums and all the challenges that come up that time of year appear overwhelming, go down to 324 Oak Street and just breathe. Then go back to your own yard and deal with it as a renewed turfgrass warrior ready for battle, even if all you have is a St.

Augustinegrass. And if that doesn't work, grab a cold glass of lemonade and find a chair under the nearest shade tree.

THE RESCUE TREE

A giant oak tree stood alone with a dense forest wrapping its way three-quarters around and with a thriving village on the remaining side. If its branches, leaves, trunk, and roots could tell a story, it would go something like this:

Once upon a time, there lived a tree called the “rescue tree”. How it received its name is not totally clear, but with a life spanning ten decades, it most probably gained the name from one of the many stories told about it.

The first written evidence of the tree’s powers came in 1942. A lonely soldier separated from his unit in an ambush came upon the tree on a hot, muggy day. He took refuge in its shade and wished he could stay there all day. An enemy patrol changed his plans. When the patrol saw the soldier, they fired their weapons at him. The soldier stayed behind the solid trunk of the tree, which took the brunt of the enemy’s fire. Overhead he heard a plane flying low. The enemy patrol scattered and

decided not to pursue the soldier when the plane began strafing their position. When the soldier stepped out from behind the tree, he looked at the trunk and saw at least twelve bullets lodged into the hard wood. He felt rescued at that moment. What he didn't know was that there were dozens of other bullets inside the tree whose presence had been covered by the bark growing around them. A short time later, the soldier heard another patrol approaching. He braced for another assault, but it was his unit, instead of the enemy, looking for him. He showed the tree to his sergeant, and the sergeant just shook his head.

A few weeks later, the magnificent tree opened its arms to catch a parachuting soldier, who, if he had made it to the ground, would have been immediately captured by the enemy below. As it was, all the anti-aircraft fire drowned out any sound of the parachutist hitting the tree. In the morning, patriots from the village cut the parachutist down and tended to his wounds.

Several months later, a bomber crashed into the tree and destroyed it. The fire that engulfed the

tree burned it to the ground except for a three-foot tall stump. The villagers slowly and painstakingly removed the remnants of the plane and looked for any life in their beloved tree. But, alas, the tree held no life.

Then one day a member of the Underground and a stranded pilot came into the village looking for a place to hide. The villagers wanted to help them, but they knew the enemy patrols would soon find them as they searched the village regularly and thoroughly. They had to do something, so they created false papers for them and made them a part of their village. It would be temporary, at best, but it might bide them some time to figure out a way to get them back into Allied hands.

One day, a handsome young woodcutter had an idea about the tree stump. He dug all around the base of the tree stump and used his mighty ax to cut off the stump just below ground level. With the help of his friends, he loaded the stump onto his wagon and took it back to his woodworking shop only a short distance away. The young man removed a 3-inch slab at the top and then worked

feverishly, cutting out the interior of the stump. When the interior of the stump was hollow, he attached the slab back on the top with interior hinges. While he was working on the stump, his friends were busy digging a tunnel from under his workshop to the exact spot where the stump had been in the ground. When only a few shovelfuls of dirt remained, the woodcutter and his friends hauled the stump back to its original spot at the edge of the forest. They filled in the area around the stump and spread old leaves around the stump to hide any fresh dirt. Then they removed the last of the dirt from inside the tunnel beneath the stump. They now had a way to get the member of the Underground and the pilot away from the houses in the village. Timing remained a very critical factor.

A few weeks later, another member of the Underground snuck into the village and said a rescue ship stood anchored just offshore. It could not stay for long at that spot with the enemy still so active in the area. As he was giving this information to those in the village, one of the young patriots saw an enemy patrol come into town. The

messenger now became one of those needing rescue. It became time to move. The young patriot went to the enemy patrol and told them he saw two strangers heading into the woodcutter's shop. As soon as the woodcutter saw the patrol coming and knowing what their focus would be at the moment, he gave the signal, and the fugitives went into the tunnel and out the stump. With his woodworking skills, the woodcutter cleverly concealed the entrance to the tunnel in his shop. Every time someone escaped through the tunnel, the people of the village planted a new tree around the stump. It was their way of knowing the number of lives rescued.

Finally, the war came to an end and a somewhat normal life returned to the village. The little Catholic church in the village that had no priest during the war welcomed a new shepherd to lead the flock. The new priest felt it important to get to know everything he could about the church's members and about the little village. He became fascinated with the story of the rescue tree and had one of his parishioners show him where it was. They weaved their way through the young trees

surrounding the stump and it finally came into view. The priest pulled up on the top of the stump and it opened. When he looked inside, he could see that at some point there was a cave-in just below the opening.

The priest remained intrigued with the rescue tree and came up with a plan. He got the woodcutter to bring a partial wagon load of dirt out to the stump, and they filled in the stump the rest of the way to the top. The following month, the priest decided to have a sunrise service at the stump on Easter Sunday. As part of the service, they removed the slab that served as the lid to the stump, and they planted a new oak tree into the dirt inside the stump. The rescue tree that had taken the brunt of so much evil during the wars of its lifetime and who had seemingly given up life with the plane crash, now breathed anew in a sort of resurrection, if you will.

And, in another twist of fate, so to speak, the young woman member of the Underground that first used the rescue tree stump as a means of escape came back for a visit to the little village. She

just wanted to thank the people for helping her. During her visit, she fell in love with the handsome young woodcutter. They got married and welcomed six children into their home.

And, of course, as it should be, they lived happily ever after.

MRS. DUNSTON'S MAGIC FLOWER MIX

Sarah Dunston loved to grow flowers. She had twenty acres on the outskirts of town with two large greenhouses on it that she operated as Sarah's Gardens. Unquestionably, she grew the most beautiful flowers in the region. When asked how she gained such a green thumb, she would always reply, "Mrs. Dunston's Magic Flower Mix". As to the ingredients of the product, she declined to reveal how she came up with this "Magic Mix". On other things, though, she was less mum.

On one particular Tuesday, Sarah welcomed the fifth-grade class of Belvedere Elementary School to tour her gardens. She relished talking to the kids and had stories galore to share with them. With school tours, she always made sure each child got a small paper cup with a growing young seedling when they first arrived. Every cup had a label that gave the common name of the plant as well as the scientific name. When the tour ended and the

kids got ready to board the bus, she always challenged the young ones with a test. If they could tell her the name of the plant that they had without reading the label, then they got a special bonus gift—usually something of a sweeter nature. Because she made the plants so interesting with her tales and tips for remembering their names, most kids got at least the common name. A few could even recite the scientific name. For those poor souls who didn't pay attention and could not remember common or scientific names, well, they also still received a gift—a nice fresh pack of spinach seeds.

As the line dwindled down to get on the bus, one young lad at the end of the line posed a question to Sarah, “Mrs. Dunston,” asked Jimmy. “How do you get the flowers to grow so pretty?”

“Well, now, Jimmy,” said Sarah, reading his name tag. “I'll just have to show you my Magic Flower Mix.” Calling out to Mrs. Davis, the teacher for the fifth grade, “Mrs. Davis, is it okay to show Jimmy something really quick?”

“Sure,” answered Mrs. Davis.

“Okay, Jimmy. Follow me back to the barn.”

Sarah opened the barn door and took Jimmy behind a little divider.

“Wow,” exclaimed Jimmy. “Is that a flower-making machine?”

“Not exactly, Jimmy, but it is what I use to help me grow the flowers.”

“That’s cool, Mrs. Dunston.”

“Okay, Jimmy. Back to the bus, but remember this is our little secret, okay?”

When the school bus pulled out of her driveway, Sarah went back to work in the greenhouse, satisfied that she had helped to expand the imagination of the blooming young folks of the community.

Later that evening, Jimmy’s mom asked him if he enjoyed the tour at Sarah’s Gardens.

“Yes, Mom,” he replied. “It was really nice. Can we put my plant in the window like Mrs. Dunston does in the greenhouse?”

“We sure can, Jimmy,” answered his mom. “What was your favorite part?”

“Getting to see Mrs. Dunston’s flower-making machine,” answered Jimmy.

“Flower-making machine? ... What did this flower-making machine look like?”

“It was a big shiny pot with lots of curly pipes.”

“A big shiny pot with lots of curly pipes, hmm,” repeated Jimmy’s mom. “That sounds an awful lot like a ... no, it couldn’t be. Was there anything else you remember about this machine?”

“Yes, she had a fire going underneath it,” answered Jimmy.

“Well, that certainly sounds like a flower-making machine to me, Jimmy,” said his mom.

After Jimmy went to bed, his mom called her best friend and fellow fifth-grade mom, Betty Jackson.

“Hi, Betty, this is Liz.”

“Oh, hi, Liz,” answered Betty.

“Betty, I was wondering if Matt said anything special about their tour to Sarah’s Gardens today?”

“Well, he seemed to enjoy it. He proudly told me the name of his plant.”

“Did he say anything else?” asked Liz.

“Not a whole lot more. I was happy to get that much out of him.”

“He didn’t happen to mention anything about a flower-making machine, did he?” asked Liz.

“A flower-making machine? ... What are you talking about, Liz?”

“Jimmy told me he saw Mrs. Dunston’s secret flower-making machine and that’s how she grows such beautiful flowers.”

“Okay, but you know how kids can imagine things sometimes, Liz,” said Betty. “What did this flower-making machine look like?”

“He said it was a big shiny pot with lots of curly pipes and a fire underneath it,” answered Liz.

“A big shiny pot with lots of curly pipes and a fire underneath it? ... That sounds an awful lot like a ... a still.”

“That’s what I thought, Betty. Do you think we should say anything to anybody?” asked Liz.

“Let me tell Tom, and maybe he can check it out.”

“Okay, thanks, Betty,” said Liz. “A little bit of intrigue, huh?”

“Very interesting, indeed.”

The next day Tom, a deputy sheriff, made a casual visit to Sarah’s Gardens. Pulling up next to the barn, Tom got out of his patrol car and greeted Sarah by the door.

“Hi, Sarah,” said Tom. “How are you today?”

“I’m good, Tom,” replied Sarah. “What brings you out to this neck of the woods today?”

“Oh, just passing by, when I remembered Betty’s birthday coming up, and I thought I’d get her a flowering plant. Everybody knows you have the prettiest flowers in the county.”

“Oh, I’ve got some beautiful Peace roses in bloom right now. Come let me show you.”

Sarah led Tom back to her rose area and showed him the gorgeous block of roses growing in containers. As they walked, Tom studied everything along the path to see if anything suspicious stood out.

“These are beautiful, Sarah. I’ll take one of these Peace roses.”

“I’m sure Betty will love it, Tom,” said Sarah. “It’s got plenty of buds coming on it too.”

“Tell me, Sarah, what is the secret to your flower growing success?”

“I’m glad you asked, Tom. Let me show you.”

Sarah led Tom back to the barn and opened the door. She walked over to a shelf and grabbed a small bag of Mrs. Dunston's Magic Flower Mix.

"Here you go, Tom. Put one cupful of this around your rose once a month."

"Mrs. Dunston's Magic Flower Mix, huh? Is that all there is to it?"

"That will do it. Just follow the label for the dosage for any other plants."

"Well, Sarah, and here I thought you had some kind of flower-making machine in the barn."

"Flower-making machine? ... Oh, oh ... Mrs. Dunston does have a little help. If you promise not to tell, I'll show you my little secret helper."

A little surprised that she would show him so easily (he was a deputy sheriff, after all), Tom carefully considered his words.

"Sarah, I hate to say this, but that looks an awful lot like a still."

Looking at her machine, Sarah said, "Well ... yes ... yes, I guess it does, but that's because it was

a still that my old grandpa had in his garage. When he died, I cleaned out his garage and I found it under an old tarp. I had no idea what I'd ever use it for, but you know me, I have a hard time throwing anything out."

"Sarah, you know it's illegal to run a still in this county," said Tom.

"Yes, of course, but it's not running as a still. It's what I use to make Mrs. Dunston's Magic Flower Mix."

Tom looked at the liquid collected in the jar under the copper tubing. He walked over, picked up the jar, and took a sniff of the liquid.

"Sarah, this is alcohol, moonshine, hooch, whatever you want to call it."

"I don't know about that, but it smells so awful, I take it out back and pour it around in the field. I'm always glad to get it out of the barn, but I discovered that it works great in keeping out those Bully Weevils from the field better than anything I've ever bought."

“So, you pour the liquid out onto the ground?” asked Tom.

“Yes, like I said, it’s good for getting rid of those weevils. What I really use is the ground up mash in the bottom of the pot. I take the sediment and mix it with ... do I have to tell you what all I mix them with? It’s kind of my secret recipe for Mrs. Dunston’s Magic Flower Mix.”

“No, no, Sarah. Let me just ask you one more time. Do you do anything else with the liquid from your machine?”

“No, I’m glad to get rid of it. I feel fortunate to have been able to put it to good use.”

“Okay, Sarah. Look, you need to be very careful with this machine. I’ve known you a long time and I know you wouldn’t do anything illegal, but if someone else were to see this machine ... Well, it is a still of a sort and you could get in a lot of trouble. Maybe keep it well hidden and don’t show it to anybody, not even inquisitive little kids.”

“I’m sorry, Tom. I guess I never thought about it in that way. I just know it has been, ... well, like a miracle to me.”

“I know, Sarah. Just out of curiosity, what all do you cook in there? Would you be using corn?”

“Sometimes I’ll throw in some ears of corn if the earworms have beat me to it ... but I have this problem with henbit and wild onion in my pasture. I pull all those weeds I can and grind them up. Then I mix them in certain proportions with other things that I don’t want from the garden, and it all goes into the pot.”

“Henbit and wild onion? I love it ... Keep your flower-making machine out of sight and mum’s the word, right?”

“Absolutely, Tom. Absolutely.”

“I will take that bag of Mrs. Dunston’s Magic Flower Mix with my rose, Sarah.”

“Thank you, Tom ... Thanks for everything and wish Betty a happy birthday for me.”

Mrs. Dunston's Magic Flower Mix never gained world-wide product status, but just about every gardener in the southern part of the state eventually used it in their quest for more beautiful flowers. When Sarah passed away a few years later, gardeners from all over came to pay their respects at her funeral.

Tom kept her little secret for the rest of his life, as he had promised. Sarah left no written recipe for her flower mix. She just did it all by heart. She declined to patent or trademark it. When she passed on, so did the recipe, for she had no remaining kin. Many tried to duplicate it with complex laboratory analysis, but they never could get the combination right. They always seemed to lack one key ingredient. There arose a rumor that late, after one long night in the lab, a technician decided to pour himself a little glass of bourbon and accidentally poured it into the beaker of material he was testing instead of the glass. In the morning, the lab was all abuzz, thinking that they had found that long awaited proper mixture in that beaker, but the

solution proved unfruitful, and the answer continued to elude them.

Undoubtedly, given sufficient resources and time, science will find the right combination to make Mrs. Dunston's Magic Flower Mix. It is most probable they will be able to divert more money and personnel to the project once they solve the problem they are currently facing. Agronomists and entomologists from a five-state area are desperately seeking a way to control the Bully Weevils that have wreaked havoc destroying crops everywhere in their states ... well, everywhere ... except for twenty acres with two greenhouses on it that sits on the outskirts of a small town.

THE GRASSHOPPER AND THE ROSE

Juvenile chatter among his three hundred forty-two cousins convinced the tiny grasshopper that one day he could become a beautiful butterfly. None of them knew where that supposed fact came from, but it was fully distributed. With grasshopper family life somewhat lacking in parental oversight, the young grasshopper had to sift through certain information on his own. In his particular case, naivete and the desire to wear a coat more colorful than the dull, dingy green of his own led him to believe that he actually could do it if he could only figure out how.

After totally wiping out the lettuce crop of their first stop in the morning, the grasshopper clan moved on. Taking a side path in the garden away from the rest of his kin, the young grasshopper came upon a beautiful rose bush. After successfully navigating his way around thorny stems and spiky stipules, he found some fresh new leaves to try for

brunch. It is common knowledge that grasshoppers have both breakfast and brunch. As he chewed away, he soon came upon an ugly caterpillar who was also partaking of the same vittles. They eventually took up a conversation between bites.

“Well, young grasshopper,” said the caterpillar. “Where are your friends? Usually, your kind are among a large crowd.”

“I guess I was daydreaming and made a wrong turn,” replied the grasshopper. “The new leaves on this rose bush are quite tasty, though, aren’t they?”

“Indeed, they are, my friend,” said the caterpillar. “Indeed, they are.”

“Tell me, Mr. Caterpillar. How does one become a beautiful butterfly?”

“Ah, I see, young one,” replied the caterpillar. “You are more inquisitive than most of your sort. Well, I shall give you the wisdom I have gained. To become a beautiful butterfly, you must eat the last flower bud of a ‘Magic’ rose.”

“Is this a ‘Magic’ rose?”

“No, no, no, my little friend. If this were a ‘Magic’ rose, I surely wouldn’t need to spend my time eating from it. That bush way across the garden is a ‘Magic’ rose.”

“Then I must surely go to it,” said the young grasshopper.

“You must be very careful, though, to not eat so many of the leaves that you don’t have room for that last flower bud.”

“Thank you so much for your wise counsel, Mr. Caterpillar.”

So, the grasshopper flew over to the far side of the garden and landed near the top of the ‘Magic’ rose bush, where he could keep an eye on the nearest cluster of rose buds. Worried about what the caterpillar said about not eating too many leaves, he decided to remain near the flower cluster and just wait for the last flower bud. He looked up every once in a while to see the ugly caterpillar smugly eating away on the other rose bush. He continued to wait and wait, while the ‘Magic’ rose opened all

of her flowers, except for one last bud. Though he was getting hungry, he felt like he was in a good position to get that last flower bud. While he waited, other young caterpillars moved onto his rose bush and began eating the leaves. He must resist, though, and wait.

The grasshopper looked across the garden and saw that the ugly and plump caterpillar who was his benefactor of wisdom had stopped eating and wrapped himself in an ugly brown coat. As time wore on, the grasshopper got hungrier and hungrier, but he remained vigilant in waiting. Then he noticed the ugly brown coat of the old caterpillar crack open and a beautiful butterfly emerge.

“Surely, the caterpillar was right,” said the grasshopper to himself. “For he is now a beautiful butterfly, but ... he told me that wasn’t a ‘Magic’ rose ... Maybe it’s different for caterpillars.”

Finally, there remained the one last flower bud on his ‘Magic’ rose. The grasshopper devoured that tasty last bud. And then, he waited ... and waited ... and waited some more. But the

grasshopper had no ugly brown coat to wrap himself in. He asked some of the other caterpillars that were on his ‘Magic’ rose if they had an extra coat he could borrow, but they didn’t answer him as they wrapped themselves up.

“Well, maybe you don’t need a coat,” said the grasshopper, hopefully.

The grasshopper felt very weak. Perhaps he should have eaten some of the leaves of the ‘Magic’ rose as he waited. All the caterpillars had stripped clean the leaves of his rose, so he had to move somewhere else. He saw that the rose across the garden still had some leaves on it, so he decided to go back there. Weak from hunger, he didn’t have the strength to fly. When he tried to walk down the rose, he stumbled on a thorn and fell to the ground.

“Why haven’t I turned into a beautiful butterfly?” lamented the grasshopper. “I waited and ate the last flower bud, just like the caterpillar said ... Maybe I won’t ever be a beautiful butterfly.” In his dying breath, the grasshopper said, “Maybe I

should have just been the best grasshopper I could have been.”

The beautiful butterflies that flew overhead did not hear the final thoughts of the grasshopper. Or, if they did, they didn’t care. They were majestic, colorful butterflies and not ugly grasshoppers.

MY MELONS ARE FROM MARS

Just the other day, as I walked through the melon patch, I took note of the extraordinarily rapid growth of the cantaloupe. It seemed as though the golf ball size young fruit had grown to bowling ball size overnight. It seemed so unusual that I had to pull out the seed packet to review the variety I had planted.

While the seed packet for the ‘Venetian Wonder’ cantaloupe didn’t look out of the ordinary, when I turned it over, I saw that the seed came from the Intergalactic Seed Co. in Starstruck, Washington. Adding to the mystery, I don’t recall ever buying the seed variety, ‘Venetian Wonder’. How, then, did I come into possession of this particular seed packet? Just to the right of the seed producer’s name, I saw an icon of a little green man dressed in gardening attire.

Inside the seed packet, I found a printed sheet of paper giving planting instructions. Of course, I never read the instructions because I’m a man and

didn't feel it necessary to read such instructions. I've been planting cantaloupe for nigh on twenty years. What could they possibly tell me that I don't already know? Still, given the current situation, I took it upon myself to see what the other 'experts' might have to say, considering my discovery.

The instructions appeared to be the run-of-the-mill statements of common sense that only a fool would ignore anyway. At the bottom of page three, I noted that the recommended planting time for maximum growth and fruit production was between April 1st and May 10th when the planets of Venus and Mars are horizontally aligned beneath the moon in the western sky. Needless to say, I found that a little strange. As I recall, though, that did coincide with the time that I planted them.

When the following morning arrived, the cantaloupe already showed signs of being ready to harvest. Further research that day on the internet into the Intergalactic Seed Co. showed no digital footprint whatsoever. I pulled out the seed packet again to see if I had missed anything. I don't know how I could have missed it before, but my wife said

she knew how. There it read in black and white, “There are two strains of ‘Venetian Wonder’ cantaloupe. If your melons show undo speed in growth and maturity, it is possible that you may have the rarer strain that was discovered by a breeder with classified clearance. We can make no guarantee on this strain.”

My cantaloupe certainly seemed to fit the description of the rarer strain, but curiosity had me going back over the complete crop history from planting to what appeared to be time to harvest. Previous years’ cultivation of melons always involved a lot of monitoring and spraying for pests and disease, but I did nothing with this crop of melons. This amazing crop with its rapid growth, early harvesting, and complete lack of infestation by pests and disease left me with a dilemma. Do I share my experience with my neighbors and friends or not? I can hear it all now.

“Sure, Bob. Sure, sure. We believe you, Bob.”

I could not offer chronological proof of any kind in the crop's progression, but merely the end product. Nobody else's melons are even remotely ready for harvest. Perhaps I should say nothing and leave the crop as a testament to my extraordinary gardening skill or even do a little story enhancement. No, I've probably told too many fishing tales for that to be credible. I shall have to give considerable thought to the problem.

As I previously mentioned, I found no digital footprint for Intergalactic Seed Co., so I decided to call the United States Department of Agriculture to see if they had ever heard of either them or the 'Venetian Wonder' variety of Cantaloupe. After about twenty minutes of staying on hold with a fiddling tune repeating about every minute and being told about fifteen times how important my call was to them, I finally got a human voice. But it was merely a recording telling me to leave a message and they would get back to me in 5 to 10 business days. So, I left my message and went to harvest my melons. Before I got out the door, though, the

phone rang, and a senior agricultural agent came on the line.

“Mr. Smith, this is senior agent Brad Barnes from the Department of Agriculture. I understand you have a seed packet from the Intergalactic Seed Co. that you wished to inquire about.”

“Yes, Agent Barnes,” I answered. “You see, I ...”

“I’m sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Smith, but is there a code on the back of the seed packet?”

Turning the packet over, I read off the code. “It’s 75643219.”

The phone went eerily quiet. Finally, I asked, “Agent Barnes, are you there? Did you get that number?”

“Yes, uh ... uh ... uh,” stammered Agent Barnes. “Mr. Smith, may I send someone out to your place this afternoon to see the melons?”

“Certainly,” I replied. “I’ll be here all day.”

About two o’clock that afternoon, a big black SUV pulled into my drive and four men dressed in

hazardous waste-type suits got out and approached me in the garden.

“Mr. Smith,” said the apparent leader of the group. “Special Agent Tom Witherspoon. My boss, Senior Agent Barnes, said we could inspect your cantaloupe.”

“Sure, the melon patch is right over there.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smith, for your cooperation. We just have to inspect the melons, the vines, and the roots, and maybe take a few samples.”

After about an hour of examination and consultation, Agent Witherspoon started to walk over to me. Then one of the group members called him back over for further consultation. Finally, he came up to me.

“Sir, may we cut into one of your melons?” he asked.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I answered.

After cutting open the fully ripe melon, they passed a meter of some kind over it. It could have been a Geiger counter. More consultation, perhaps

a little more animated, among the group members continued for about another thirty minutes.

“Mr. Smith,” said Agent Witherspoon. “We have concluded our investigation, and we must, respectfully ask, that you not speak of these melons to anyone else.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m not at liberty to discuss the details, but I can say it is a classified matter of utmost importance. There has been a breach in the security surrounding it. I’m afraid I’m going to have to confiscate that seed packet and any seed in it.”

“Okay. Let me go into the shed and get it.”

One of the four men accompanied me into the shed. I retrieved the packet and gave it to Agent Witherspoon.

“Here you go, Agent Witherspoon.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smith. I’m also afraid to tell you that we will have a crew here in about a half hour to clear out this melon patch. We will fairly compensate you for your crop loss.”

I stood there, dumbfounded. Barely able to even get out, “Everything?”

They came and removed every last melon, leaf, and root from my melon patch. While I received a generous payment for my melon patch, the whole experience left a little gap in my, at times, skeptical mind. I couldn’t help but contemplate the details that were beyond my ‘need to know’. The most reasonable conclusion seemed to be that of a top-secret project involving genetic modification. Maybe some lab assistant got bored and slipped the seed out just to see what would happen.

Well, I don’t buy it. Let’s look at the evidence on the seed packet—Intergalactic Seed Co. of Starstruck, Washington. Why would a government secret project want to assign such a controversial name to the packet at the risk of drawing panic among the masses? Then there’s the variety name ‘Venetian Wonder’—a rather clever attempt to confuse by a reference to Venice, Italy. It could be code for the origin as actually the planet Venus, but everybody knows that cantaloupe don’t grow on Venus. Perhaps they are trying to draw attention away

from the planet Mars. The planting instructions clearly gave a planting time in reference to the alignment of the two planets. Then there is the little green man in gardening attire on the seed packet. Hollywood, which could possibly know more than what we think, has depicted little green men from Mars in dozens of TV shows and movies.

I believe the evidence points to the conclusion that my melons are from Mars. You are certainly free to disagree with me on this, but I have seen too many shows about shadow governments to deny it.

I suppose I shouldn't have slipped three of those seeds into my pocket before I gave the packet to Agent Witherspoon, but those ... but those ... those were my melons from Mars.

PARSLEY IN A SHOE

Mary Fulton had a very unusual garden. Perhaps it is because Mary Fulton was a very unusual person. Having grown up on a family farm with many of her early years barely rising to the level of lean, she gained a certain wisdom that many today could surely use.

Today, we live in such times where the packaging of the products we buy is often three times bigger than what's inside. At least we have figured out how to recycle some of it. But, alas, when the product stops working a year later, we add it to the heaping mound at the landfill. Ask any of the other farmers around Mary's home place, "Where's the nearest landfill?" and you'd get an answer of, "What's a landfill?". Okay, maybe that's an exaggeration. To be fair, there were a few things that Mary had to throw away, but most came back as compost.

As you strolled through Mary's garden, you began to realize that you were walking through an

outdoor art gallery and a garden. She never set out any particular design. It just grew and grew by the simple fact that she couldn't find it in herself to part with much of anything. An old tractor wheel served nicely as a frame for storing a garden hose. That same old tractor provided a seat for weeding and planting. In fact, just about the entire tractor, except for the engine that she sold to a tractor scrapyard, now lived in Mary's garden.

On a bench of a simple potting shed, you'd find an old coffee pot continuing life as a storage container for coffee grounds destined for compost. When an old garden hose got too many leaks, Mary cut it up into small sections for staking and wiring new fruit trees that needed support. Used burlap feed sacks held many a harvest of apples, and when they eventually wore out, she would cut them into smaller pieces and use them around new tomato plants to ward off cutworms. A broken dish would be smashed into smaller pieces and used in the bottom of a pot to help with drainage.

The land in the farming area where Mary lived had, understatedly, many rocks to harvest.

She took every rock she encountered in her digging and put it onto a huge rock pile at the corner of her property. When the season's rains had sufficiently cleaned the rocks, she found many uses for the clean rocks. She probably had enough she could have opened a rock business had there been any demand for them. She fashioned a mold from an old tractor mounted seeder and made decorative planter boxes with the smaller rocks cemented on the sides. Larger rocks transformed into whimsical garden figures.

Speaking of planters, an eclectic array of worn-out items from house and field found a second or perhaps, third or fourth life as a planter. When a neighbor had a piece of "junk", they would bring it over to Mary and she would find an empty spot and put it in. Maybe a sophisticated cosmopolitan art dealer would consider it all junk, but not Mary and certainly not anyone who really took the time to become fascinated with it. Admittedly, though, most everything was junk, but it never looked like a junkyard. The garden was clean and neat, and the junk looked like it belonged. She

could tell you a story for almost everything in her garden.

One day, Mary fell ill and could not tend to her garden for over a month. Her neighbors and friends at church kept the garden from becoming too overgrown. One of those who missed Mary dearly was old Sam Turner, Lance County's premier junk dealer. As a regular customer of Larry's Junk Boutique, which Mary patronized when she needed something really unusual, they developed a good relationship with each other. Rumor always had it that Sam might ask her to marry him one day, but nothing came of it. Sam's discounted price to his best customer always seemed unusually steep for such an experienced and savvy businessman, even though he advertised "Quality Junk at a Quality Price". When Mary got well enough to continue working her garden museum, old Sam had a month's worth of personally selected specimen junk delivered to her farm. Old Sam and his delivery helpers even stayed for the rest of the day and helped her get caught up on her gardening, which the rumormongers consumed as more fodder.

Someone once asked Mary why she did it. She said it was the only way she knew. Growing up poor on an old farm in the Depression era, her mom gleaned many survival instincts from the fields of necessity. And she passed those instincts on to her daughter.

When I first visited Mary's farm out on Farm Road C, I immediately became fascinated by everything I saw. In a simpler way, her ingenuity rivaled Leonardo da Vinci. I revisited Mary's garden every year for ten straight years. My eleventh visit stood differently. The harvest bins were empty, for unbeknownst to me, she had passed away two months earlier.

The county commission talked about buying Mary's farm from the estate and turning it into a recreation area, but it never came to be. Perhaps no one remained who had the heart and mind to see such a project through—I don't know.

On the tenth and last visit that I saw Mary, she left me with a parting gift, as she did every time. As I opened the car door to leave, she came

running out and handed me an old shoe that overflowed with a parsley plant. I still have that old shoe, but with time and the elements, it has started to deteriorate. I replant it every year with a new parsley plant. I'm sure there will come a time when it can no longer serve as a planter, but maybe then I will bag it up and put it in the old chest in the attic.

As the years go by, I think about family and friends who have passed away. Some of the things that make you remember them seem odd at times. There is certainly none odder than parsley in a shoe.

ADVENTURES OF PLANT BOY

As someone who has entered the golden years of life, I find quiet walks in the garden to be inspiring. Perhaps it's the knowledge that the time is nearing for me to join God in whatever version of the Garden of Eden that's now growing in heaven. Perhaps it's that my mind no longer has room for the clutter of inane and useless information. Or maybe it's that, as I reflect on the names of plants, I find that so many of the people they named plants after died at an age that I have long passed thanks to modern medicine. It's probably all the above, in one way or another, affecting my walks these days.

While I enjoy walking through my own garden, with its unique satisfying quality, I also like strolling through all kinds of botanical gardens. The trail today brings out numerous memories of youthful encounters with the plant world. Of course, as a youth, those encounters lacked the mature appreciation of the significance of all that

surrounded me. They were just part of growing up as ‘Plant Boy’.

As I round the first turn in the garden path today, I come across an old, large *Ficus benghalensis* tree. With its huge prop roots and thick horizontal branching, it is like a mansion for tree climbing. While I would never dream of climbing it today, I couldn’t help but lift the veil of age and open the cover to ‘The Adventures of Plant Boy’ when the massive tree came into view.

We didn’t have a banyan tree in our front yard, but we did have a one-room Ficus tree of some sort. Of course, I can’t tell you the exact species, because Plant Boy had more important things to attend to than learning the exact scientific name at the time. A big old tree proved sufficient knowledge for the moment. Its limbs were just large enough for hours of comfortable seating and strategic placement of plastic army men, cowboys, or Indians. I had a good view of the neighborhood and could do my surveillance without being seen,

as the limbs were always filled with thick foliage. It was on a Tuesday, I believe, that I spotted the mailman coming down the sidewalk. I immediately went into quiet mode and remained absolutely motionless. As he walked under the tree, he said, “Hi ya, Mark.” I made a mental note to rethink my position but quickly forgot any notion to do so.

Later that afternoon, my buddies and I met in front of a neighbor’s Ixora hedge. In the never-ending battle to protect the neighborhood and our families, we sometimes needed instant energy. We would pull an Ixora flower apart and suck off the sweet nectar from inside so we could continue the battle refortified.

They were everywhere—in the neighborhood, at the elementary school, at church, at the grocery store, probably left by aliens from Mars. Of course, we lived in South Florida and the plant I’m referring to is the croton, later learned to be *Codiaeum variegatum*. I always liked the color and pattern of the leaves, at least as much as a kid could. When the dreaded time for science projects came around in school, I did one on the pigments

in the croton leaf. When the science fair ended, I found that I had actually enjoyed the project, though I obviously could not admit it. One day, I watched my dad doing something to a branch of the croton in our backyard. Perhaps he was performing some kind of surgery, I don't know. He took a knife and scraped an area around the bark. Then he wrapped some kind of wiry looking stuff around the area that he had scraped. After that, he wrapped the area with aluminum foil from our kitchen. Whatever he did must not have been successful, because a month or two later he had to amputate the branch. I didn't quite understand why as the branch always looked healthy. My partner, Jeff, said he heard his parents talking one night, and it sounded like the plant had caught a disease from France—marcottage or something like that. But I don't recall the plant ever leaving the backyard. Jeff had a reputation for stretching the truth.

Another kid in the neighborhood had an interesting tree in his backyard that we would often sit under and discuss security strategy. Sometimes these meetings would get boring, as most meetings

today still are. When we really got bored, we'd pick up the fallen fruit capsules and squeeze them. They would then go pop and release a little liquid. I suppose it was a messy tree, but the popping sound of the fruit in our hands had a therapeutic effect on our weary minds.

Stretching the length of our backyard on one side, a thick hedge produced these round, kind of ridged cherry-like fruit. My friend, Jeff, claimed the fruit contained a deadly poison and a mere brief touch to the lips would send you into a frozen-like state that you'd never wake from. When you're a kid, it can seem confusing to glean the truth from everything being said—especially from Jeff. However, I heeded Jeff's warning (we were partners in a dangerous world), and I never touched the fruit. That belief remained in effect until I saw my father pick one fruit and eat it. He didn't fall into a frozen state. He ate seven more and survived for another twenty years. Jeff's credibility grew weaker with me, but we still fought many neighborhood battles together. I later learned this cherry-like plant came from this country called Surinam. Picked too soon

and they gave you good pucker power. Picked when they were dark red or almost purple and they were sweet. My mother made a marmalade from them. With such new-found knowledge, the hedge became another oasis for quick nourishment during our neighborhood patrols.

We lived in an older area of town, actually right next to an air force base. I spent many nights looking out my bedroom window watching the green strobe light on top of the base water tower. We were pretty naïve, I guess, about all the plants around us that were invading our portion of the earth. Well, I was naïve for sure, but I'm not sure what that meant. The list of plants now considered invasive abounded where we lived. Australian Pines made nearly impenetrable borders. I actually grew some in one of my first business projects. The *Melaleuca* trees on our neighbor's lot had cool bark, and we frequently pulled off little strips for some make-believe activity. After watching tv and hearing about all the holly at Christmas time, I presented my mom with a homemade wreath of Florida Holly or Brazilian Pepper. It only lasted about

two days, and it took about that long to get all the sap off my hands.

We had a large coconut tree in our backyard. Benny Wilson dared me to climb it one day. I took him up on the dare and climbed high enough to touch the coconuts. I never climbed another coconut tree in short pants. It always had plenty of coconuts on it and I never had one fall on my head, at least not that I can remember, and I probably would have remembered something like that. I suppose guardian angels for little boys must get in a lot of overtime pay. Occasionally, the gang would take the husk off a coconut and poke holes in the eyes at the top so we could drink the coconut milk. I never found it that appealing, but it was always good to know we had another survival tool.

When summer came around, I got to ride out to the sod farm with my uncle in the semi. When the forklift operator, I think his name was Stanley, finished loading the truck, he walked over to some bushes growing by the ditch. He picked off some purple berries and offered me some. I declined, but my uncle took them gratefully. I guess I still had

Jeff's warnings in my head, because I waited to see if either of them dropped dead first. When they didn't, I had my first taste of wild elderberries. They were pretty sweet and once again added to my survival knowledge.

My dad did a lot of experimenting with gardening. One year he made a deal with the local concrete company to dump their leftover concrete at our nursery and save the dump fees. He always had a form ready to pour when they pulled in. Dad built some small square concrete bins with each one having a drain and a water faucet. He put container plants in them and when it came time to water, he closed the drain and opened the faucet allowing the plants inside to absorb water as they needed and then he opened the drain and let the remaining water out. Before putting ornamental plants in them, he experimented with rutabagas in pots. The rutabagas grew like crazy and despite giving away all that we could, we got sick of eating rutabagas (even dad).

We had a large White Bird of Paradise, *Streptopelia nicolai*, outside our back door. When we

weren't being dive-bombed, we enjoyed watching the local mockingbird use the boats of the Bird of Paradise as his personal watering hole.

The elderly woman down the street loved to garden. Sometimes during the summer or on weekends she would hire me to help with gardening for the princely sum of five cents per hour. What did I know, I was just a kid, and it was better than planting spinach at home for nothing. She had a *Plumeria* tree in her front yard with red flowers. I always thought she was pulling my leg when she called it a Frangipani. It sounded like something some kid in the neighborhood would call it just for fun. It did kind of roll off the tongue with a little practice. She was happy with my work, and I was happy to have a little money to buy more baseball cards. Isn't that what the free market is all about?

Speaking of rolling off the tongue, I always had a hard time pronouncing "avocado". It would come out as abra cadabra, abrel cabalado, or any of a dozen other ways. I'm proud to say I can properly pronounce it today.

The more I read *The Adventures of Plant Boy* in my mind, the more I realized how many things I hadn't thought about in over fifty years. I hope this little peek into the youthful encounters of a small boy will give you reason to grab a cold lemonade, sit under a shade tree in your garden, and recall your own youthful adventures.

SYDNEY'S RENT-A-TREE

Every year, seasonal climate extremes slowed business for Sydney's plant and tree nursery. One cold January morning, a large black Cadillac came down the lane to his nursery, and a distinguished-looking gentleman exited from the passenger-side back seat. Normally, Sydney, his wife, or his daughter would have immediately gone out to welcome any approaching customer. Today, it caught Sydney a little off guard as 20 degrees and falling snow rarely produced visitors wanting to stroll the gardens. The gentleman carefully walked across the snow and entered the nursery office.

"Welcome, sir," said Sydney. "What can I do for you, today?"

"Well, sir," said the gentleman. "My wife is bored with all this snow and ice, and she wants to have a party. Perhaps, you may think this an odd question, but do you ever rent trees and shrubs?"

"Rent trees and shrubs?" questioned Sydney. "No, I ... uh ... I've never done that."

“I’m in a bit of a pickle, you see,” said the gentleman. “I told my wife I was sure I could find someone to do it.”

“Well ... I ... uh ... I suppose I could work something out,” said Sydney, while thinking to himself how he could possibly manage something like that. “Did you have anything particular in mind?”

“Tropical. It must be tropical.”

“Tropical,” repeated Sydney. Looking out the frosted office window, he continued, “It’s the middle of winter and you want something tropical?”

“That would be the ticket, old chap,” answered the gentleman.

Sydney managed to grow a few tropical plants to satisfy a small demand during the spring and summer, but those were all gone. Still, he did have some bananas and citrus trees in pots that he moved into the greenhouse during the winter.

“Well ... I do have a few things in the greenhouse that are tropical, but I couldn’t put them outside in these temperatures.”

“Oh, everything would be inside,” said the gentleman. “Everything would be inside.”

“The thing is,” said Sydney. “I’ve never done anything like this before, so I don’t have any idea how much to charge.”

“Oh, money is no object,” said the gentleman. “You just do the job, and you will be handsomely paid.”

“Okay, I guess we’re going to have a party. A tropical party. First, I need to get your name, address, phone number, when you want to have this party and so on.”

“Right. It’s George Matheson, 1712 Shafer’s Glen Road, Colin Ridge.”

As Sydney wrote everything down, he realized there were only two places on Shafer’s Glen Road that he knew of. And both were very, very big estates. The next day he visited Mr. Matheson’s

estate and got a feel for the party room. The following day, he took inventory of what he had and then called several of his friends who he knew to have some tropical plants in their greenhouses.

Two weeks later, the Matheson's had a party with the thermostat set at 90 degrees and a room full of people wearing leis and flowery shirts. The weather outside hung at 22 degrees and the snow fell in light flurries.

Well paid, indeed. With the job complete, Sydney had a chance to reflect on the project. It all just seemed to fall into place as a nice supplement to his nursery business. With the weather, machinery, pests, diseases, and a host of other issues, Sydney had developed a strong sense of improvisation. He felt he had taken that to a whole other level with the Matheson's party. As unusual as that first endeavor was, there arose many others over the years that rivaled it. After a while, Sydney stopped questioning why folks did what they did. 'Go with the flow' became one of his favorite sayings with each new job.

Another one of his more interesting jobs also came in the dead of winter. Acorn Productions hired Sydney to help with a movie set. The movie director and producer wanted a particular scene shot in snowy and icy weather, which matched conditions at the time. To complicate things, though, they wanted the same scene shot in spring, summer, and fall, and they didn't have time to wait. Fortunately, this job came after Sydney had gained several years of experience and built up an extensive contact list across the country. He didn't have too much trouble locating plants and trees in a state that would match the scene in different seasons. Trucking costs were enormous, but the movie producer had a very generous budget. As a bonus, Sydney got to keep the material and plant it in his nursery to sell the next year.

The one item that presented a little more of a challenge was the dormant brown Bermudagrass growing on the set. They tried dying a small plot green, but the director didn't like the look. Sydney found a Bermudagrass grower in South Florida who still had green grass, so he ordered ten pallets

of green Bermudagrass. They had to ship it in a climate-controlled van, so it didn't brown too quickly when entering the colder temperatures of the area. The movie company provided a crew of about fifty men to clear the snow and install the green grass on top of the brown. Working quickly, they got all the scenes shot in a day. When they finished shooting, they picked up the new grass and hauled it to the landfill. Sydney, being a plant lover, kind of hated to see all that grass go to waste, but he did his job and got well paid for it.

With all the well-paying jobs over the years, none gave Sydney more satisfaction than the Christmas party thrown at the orphans' home in Wabash. A particularly bleak winter had cast a barren chill over the area. Sydney's Rent-A-Tree created a room filled with Christmas flowers and lots of holly in full berry. They had Christmas trees for all the orphans, and they decorated them with the kids' favorite items. Supposedly, Santa Claus came down special, too. Some claim that Santa looked an awful lot like Sydney.

Were you to see Sydney on your travels through life, I'm sure he would tell you to "go with the flow", learn how to improvise, and always keep an open heart and mind for that next opportunity, no matter how unusual it might seem at first.

ERIC MENDOZA

BOTANICAL EXPLORER

For five days a week, he juggles the books for a local building contractor. When the weekend comes, though, Eric Mendoza's alter ego takes over. As a botanical explorer, he has braved some of the most dangerous places on earth.

When the alarm beckons him to start his journey, he immediately turns it off and grabs a dog-eared map from his nightstand. Plotting out a course to reach a destination is critical, but even with a detailed plan, who knows what unforeseen obstacles loom beyond the horizon. What is around that next bend? What world will open in the next break of dense foliage?

After eating a hearty breakfast, our intrepid adventurer heads for the garage, as he does every morning during the week. He walks around the Ford Focus, an economical, yet comfortable means of travel. Such a vehicle is not suitable for Eric

Mendoza, Botanical Explorer. Removal of a camouflage tarp reveals a forty-year-old Jeep complete with roll bars, winches on the front and back, and large mud-grip tires. This historical vehicle has everything an explorer could want—extra fuel cans, racks for all kinds of weapons or tools, places to mount large water cans, and on and on.

Inspection complete, he backs the Jeep out of the garage and onto the street, once again leaving the comfort and safety of civil life. The start of his journey could be the most dangerous part of his itinerary. Yes, driving on Interstate 4 has changed many a man. Normally mild-mannered, law-abiding citizens during the week transform into race-track bravados, daring elementary physics to stand in the way. Those speed limit signs are merely suggestions for the faint of heart. Little wooden crosses adorn the road shoulders, but they mean nothing. Eric's knuckles regain their color when he pulls off to get gas. Pulling into the gas station, he passes another Jeep owner, and they tip hats in respect. Back onto the highway, he has seven more miles to reach his exit. Finally reaching his

destination, he is surprised at the size of the parking lot to the launch site. Could there really be that many fellow explorers out there?

Taking a packed tram to the entrance, he stands in a long line to gain access. The tickets are steep, but he would gladly pay more if they asked—adventure never comes cheap. The people in line behind him have a crying kid that just won't stop, and they haven't even started the trek. The man inspecting his backpack for any invasive species questions the container of food he has in a side pocket, but Eric quickly answers that he sometimes likes a mid-afternoon snack. He would never reveal that it was a defense against marauding squirrels. Always being prepared for the unknowns carried Eric through many a chance occurrence.

Shooting is Eric's passion, with a camera that is. He always carries three cameras with him, each set up for a specific purpose. These valuable tools provide the evidence of any discovery that he makes.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the young woman. “Could you take a picture of us with my smartphone?”

“Uh ... sure,” answered Eric.

While quite knowledgeable in identifying plants himself, he always appreciates those who’ve gone before him and set out markers for the names of exotic species. Usually with no expectations, he takes each plant as it comes. Today, however, he has one species that he feels he must encounter. The *Bioarboreus multifaunus*, or more commonly, the Tree of Life, is tops on his agenda. Having done a fair amount of research on this species, he is fascinated by what he’s learned. The Indigenous people of the area have done much work carving local animals into the tree’s massive trunk and buttress roots. One might expect that such invasive carving would have a detrimental effect on the health of the tree, but the tree is as healthy today as it was twenty years ago. Another fascinating characteristic of this tree is that it looks the same every day of every season. Droughts, freezes, oppressive summer heat, flooding—nothing seems to bother this tree.

Crossing a weathered bridge, Eric sees the massive Tree of Life directly ahead. As he expects with a specimen of such prominence, fellow explorers pack the rail surrounding the tree with many taking somewhat goofy shots of themselves with the notable tree in the background. The guide near the rail is answering questions, so Eric gets in line. When he reaches the guide, he asks some basic botanical questions about the tree. She seems pleasant enough, but her answers seem generic and not indicative of someone who has delved into the science of the species.

“I wonder,” Eric says to himself. “If she really knows what’s going on in the delicate biology of the *Bioarboreus multifaunus*, the deep hidden secrets this tree has held within its massive frame for years.”

Having taken sufficient long-range pictures, Eric makes his way down the paved path to the base of the tree.

“Fascinating, fascinating, fascinating,” our explorer says. “The detail of these carvings is

magnificent. These massive roots almost seem more like some form of concrete than they do wood.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said an elderly woman. “Can you take a picture of my grandson and me with our smartphone?”

“Uh ... sure.”

Eric replaces the battery in one of his cameras, it being exhausted from so much use at the tree. He feels somewhat exhausted himself from the experience.

“Excuse me, sir,” said a burly young man. “Can you take a picture of my girlfriend and me in front of this tiger carving?”

“Uh ... sure.”

Leaving the Tree of Life, Eric heads farther into the jungle. Remarkably, even as he gets deeper into the more remote areas, civilization has not diminished. He notes one characteristic many of his fellow travelers seem to share. Undoubtedly, there are a number of local tribes that frequent the area

whose members seem to pride themselves on wearing the tribal headdress. Numerous members adorn their heads with bands that have rather large ears, almost mouse-like. They don't lack for imagination, though, as the ears come in all colors and embellishments. Other tribal members, commonly seen, wear a headdress that honors a deity of some sort with long floppy ears resembling a dog. Rarely seen and quite striking when it emerges, is a head covering depicting a dragon-like creature with a purple body, orange horns, and small orange wings. Those who wear the dragon must be a peaceful tribe, as their emblem always seems to have a smile on its face. The creature almost looks like a cross between reality and, well, a figment of the imagination. Normally, Eric doesn't focus on such non-botanical matters, but sometimes understanding the local population gives context to understanding the flora of a region.

Continuing on his way, Eric stops and looks under the shade of a small waterfall.

"Could it be?" he wonders. "I've seen the *Tacca chantrieri*, the Black Bat Flower or Devil

Flower, before, but this appears to be a white version. Undoubtedly a *Tacca* species also, I believe I can get a good shot to take home for further identification.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said a young lady. “Can you take a picture of my boyfriend and me in front of this waterfall?”

“Uh ... sure.”

Crossing a small bridge, Eric gazes down to the stagnant water below.

“My goodness,” he says. “Yes, I do believe those are *Victoria amazonica*, Amazon Water Lilies. If I remember correctly, they are a hybrid *Victoria* x *longwood*. Amazing!”

On a less traveled path, Eric feels the rush of wings and the peck of a bird taking aim at his pith helmet. The bird lands on a nearby *Strelitzia nicotai*, or White Bird of Paradise. He notes a Mockingbird taking a sip of water from the boat-like flower of the tree.

As he winds back to a more well-traveled path, he senses that he has entered an area reminiscent of his journey to Asia. Then he comes across a snow-covered mountain, casting an eerie shadow across the small lagoon.

“That peak reminds me of my trek around the base of Mount Everest, only a smaller version, of course.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said the balding, middle-aged man. “Could you take a picture of my wife and I with the mountain as a backdrop?”

“Uh ... sure.”

Having been in some dangerous places in his botanical travels, Eric has developed a certain sense about when it was safe to proceed and when it was not safe to proceed. There was far too much screaming coming from the area around that mountain peak. Perhaps he would venture there at another time.

Eric spent the rest of the day observing and taking photos of plants. Although he already knew most of the plants he saw, he still got a few to

research and try to ID when he got home. Despite his previous knowledge, it was interesting seeing the fruits and flowers of some of the plants he already knew.

Today he survived the dangers of the jungle, but the most treacherous part still lay ahead—the return trip on the interstate. Fortunately, the thick traffic on the interstate frequently came to a stop and prevented anyone from speeding. Arriving home safe and sound, Eric pulled his trusty Jeep back into the garage and covered it up.

The following day, the metamorphosis began anew. Khaki, survival belt, and pith helmet changed to the plain black tie and gray suit of a mild-mannered numbers custodian.

DEAR ASK-A-TREE

For the edification and enlightenment of all trees and their staff, we bring you this feature, which we think you will find to be informative and conducive to arboreal health. For security reasons, the noted educator and world-renowned horticultural game show host providing the advice that this feature contains shall remain anonymous.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

Our neighborhood has seen an uptick in the borer population lately. What should we do about it?

Willowy in Wichita

Dear Willowy,

Borers can certainly be real pests at times. The wisdom of my old friend, *Franklinia*

benjamina, comes to mind — “Borers and visitors stink in three days”. I say give them the boot.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

What’s with all these dumb dogs and cats? The dogs are always doling out unwanted fertilizer applications, and the cats are always digging their claws into our bark.

An Oak in Oakland

Dear Oaky,

Boy, they are a pain sometimes, aren’t they? Unfortunately, we are kind of in the middle. Humans seem to like their pets, so I can’t see the problem ever going away. You could try to petition the city to put in more fire hydrants and maybe start a ‘Declaw Your Cat’ campaign, but it would probably be somewhat futile, again because you’re dealing with humans and politicians. In the end, I’m afraid you’ll just have to take it and be strong as an oak.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

I'm so tired. Every year it's the same thing. I always have to put on this spectacular flower show so they will think I'm worth keeping. When I am covered with gorgeous yellow blooms, they stop and admire me, giving out lavish praise for my beauty. (My sister feels the same way about her purple blooms). Then, when I can give no more, they ignore me until another year rolls around. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy feeling pretty, but why can't I get compliments during the rest of the year?

Tabby (Ms. Tabebuia aurea) in Tampa

Dear Tabby,

I understand where you are coming from. I feel your pain; however, suck it up, sweetie. You have a gift, something that many other trees wish they had when they put out their inconspicuous

little flowers. I have personally heard compliments about your beautiful fuzzy seed pods, too. There are also many people that think your limbs are picturesque when you drop your leaves. So, you see, you do get compliments long after you've finished blooming. I will do what I can to get the word out about those other fine qualities. Take the rest time to just be you and not worry about putting on a show.

p.s.—I, too, am a big fan of your spectacular display.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

I looked up my family tree and found out I was the sap.

Sappy in Savannah

Dear Sappy,

You've been watching too much late night tv. I believe Rodney Dangerfield was the first to come up with that line. You are only as sappy as you want

to be. Get off the couch and put out some more foliage.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

What's going on with this crazy weather this year? About the time that I think it is time to start letting the buds go, we get another frost. The other night, two weeks after the weather reporter said spring was here, we got two inches of sleet, three inches of rain, and ice to boot. Is there anything that we can do about it?

Confused in Cincinnati

Dear Confused,

There is the classic quip by Charles Dudley Warner, "Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." Well, you've complained about the weather, and I can do nothing about it. So, where do we go from here? I don't know. Mark Twain said, "In

the Spring, I have counted 136 different kinds of weather inside of 24 hours.” Basically, I’m just as confused as you.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

I’m worried. I am a Red Maple and I live in the backyard of a house. I’m growing well and am surrounded by kids and dogs. Sometimes, though, I look out at the forest across the way, and I wonder if I am missing out on something. Then I hear of other forests that are being replaced by concrete. Should I shed my leaves in worry?

Maple on Elm Street

Dear Maple,

It is a curious phenomenon that there are many places where builders are bulldozing down trees to make way for developments and then naming the streets after the trees that they took out. There is a certain camaraderie that exists between

the trees and plants of a forest, so perhaps you are missing out on that, but you are alive and well cared for. Since they planted you in a development, it is highly unlikely they will ever bulldoze you down. Bloom where you are planted, my friend.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

This is Maple on Elm Street again. I forgot to mention that I heard my people talking about planting another tree in the backyard. I assume you think this would be good. I don't know what kind they might plant.

Maple on Elm Street

Dear Maple,

Confucius say, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is now."

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

I'm twenty years old and have developed a good branching structure. A new family has just moved into the house and the kids enjoy climbing my branches. They want to build a tree hut next week. I've never done this before, so is this a good idea?

Ficus in Florida

Dear Ficus,

I've heard about the Ficus branching structure and climbing kids many times. It has been nothing but praise. Have a little patience (you are working with kids, after all) and keep up the good work. Kids and trees have a special relationship that should remain alive. And sometimes they can say funny things, like I once heard one say, "Trees get leaves in the summer so their trunks don't get sunburned." It sounds like something Billy or Dolly in *Family Circus* might have said.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

We recently had some wildfires in our area. Many trees of the forest died or suffered severe damage. No one is replanting anything yet. Do you think they will replant soon? Sometimes I feel very alone.

Pining in the Woods

Dear Pining,

Have patience, my friend. There are many in the human world who care about trees, so I'm sure they will get to you and replant after they've taken care of some other things. I once read where a man by the name of Martin Luther said that even if he knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, he would still plant his apple tree. I like that guy and hope that more will follow his words.

- Dear Ask-A-Tree,

Who makes a better baseball bat, ash or maple?

Batty in Baltimore

Dear Batty,

That is an interesting and dangerous question. If I say Maple, all the Ash trees will get mad at me. If I say Ash, all the Maple trees will get mad at me. So, I am going to divert to a question of my own. They use our wood for all their bats, but why don't they have the decency to name any major league team after any of us? Sure, the animal kingdom gets more than their fair share of names. Trees get none. At least there is a Toronto Maple Leaf hockey team. I look forward to an answer from someone.

THE MAZE

Supposedly, if you go in deep enough, you will never come back. My assignment was to investigate the fourteen missing persons cases that seem to have a direct connection to the maze.

Today, I have another detective, two uniformed officers, and two dogs with me. The Maze of Shadow Valley sits at the rear of property owned by Shadow Valley Episcopal Church. Opening a wide chain link gate, we crossed the playground area of the church's day school. Passing under a large stone cross that was supported by two huge pillars, we entered the church's cemetery. While it was not officially part of the maze, it looked like it could be. Totally surrounded by an impenetrable six-foot-high hedge, the cemetery served as a channel to the entrance to the maze. When standing outside the entrance to the maze, I did not get the impression of anything sinister. But I have investigated too many cases over the years where first appearances turned ugly quickly.

The first ten feet in seemed simple enough, comprising sheared Japanese Boxwood about two feet high lining the path. We soon came to an intersection that gave us three choices - straight ahead, left, or right. Everyone had rolls of flagging tape with them, so we could mark each turn taken. A mobile unit in the church parking lot monitored our GPS tracking devices.

I chose the left turn and as we continued down the path, the sheared hedge gradually got taller, became Podocarpus, and eventually reached about seven feet in height. We came to numerous side paths and always chose the first on the left, for no other reason than everyone always thinks right.

We continued for about another 30 minutes, choosing paths, and marking the corners. Then our path opened into a huge round landscaped area. I have seen some magnificent gardens in my time, but nothing like this. It was truly awe-inspiring. As I looked around the border of the perfectly circular area, I saw what appeared to be twenty other entrances like the one we came through.

“What are you thinking, Lieutenant?” asked Detective Wallace.

“Did anybody count the number of path choices we had?”

“I noted twenty-one,” answered Officer Wainwright.

“Bill, I count twenty-two entrances into this area,” I said. “What do you get?”

“One ... twenty-two,” answered Detective Wallace. “Meaning we could have taken any path and arrived at where we are?”

“Looks that way to me,” I said.

I noticed Officer Mills looking closely at a huge red rose. “Do you see something, Officer?”

“I was just admiring this rose. It looks like a Mr. Lincoln.”

“Anything of relevance, Officer?” I asked.

“No, sir,” replied Officer Mills. “I grew up in a plant nursery family, and it just caught my eye.”

“Okay ...”

“Sir.”

“Yes, Officer Mills.”

“I just noticed something very odd with this rose.”

“What’s that?”

“As I was looking at the rose, it closed back up into a bud.”

“And that is odd?” I asked. “Don’t most flowers close up eventually?”

“No, sir. I have never seen a huge, fully open Mr. Lincoln rose close back up into a bud. Wait ... now the bud has drawn back into the stem and disappeared. This is creepy, sir.”

“Anybody else see anything unusual?” I asked.

Just then, one of the dogs strained against his leash. The handler let him go, and the dog made a beeline for a group of tall oleander plants. When the handler got up to the dog, he found the dog sniffing over a large pile of clothes.

“Lieutenant, over here,” said Officer Wainwright.

“Well, somebody has definitely been here before us,” I said. “Wainwright, check these clothes against the list of clothes being worn by our missing persons when they were last seen.”

The dog Officer Mills held began barking and pulling on his leash. He led his handler over to a set of footprints about twenty feet away.

“Lieutenant, look at these tracks,” said Officer Mills. “They start out as a large adult with a size 11 or 12. As we follow them, they appear to get smaller, and the person seems to greatly shorten his stride. Do you see it?”

“Yes, I do, Officer Mills. Bill, what do you make of this?”

“I’ve never seen anything quite like it ...”

“Over here,” yelled Officer Wainwright. “Here’s another set of tracks.”

“These tracks appear to be from a child,” said Detective Bill Wallace. “And look at the change about twenty feet ahead—almost like what a crawling baby would make.”

“Look at me, Bill,” I said. “Your mustache is turning from gray to black.”

“It is? ... And my arms feel funny, like the muscles are growing.

“Okay, people, I don’t like this. Officer Wainwright, bag up those clothes and let’s get out of here.”

“Chopper 1, we are coming out and hope to meet you in a little while at the rendezvous spot.”

“Do you need us to help with navigating the maze?”

“Negative, Chopper 1. I think we’ve got it figured out. But keep an eye on us.”

“Will do, Lieutenant ... Got a visual on you now.”

The exit path that we took did lead us back to the main path where we found one of our blue markers. From there, we progressed quickly back to the entrance of the maze. In our case, the entrance also served as our exit. We had found no other external exits in our preliminary scouting. Heading over to the mobile unit, everyone walked in silence. When we reached the mobile unit in the parking lot, the chopper crew joined us.

“I know what we encountered today was bizarre. It’s going to be a little difficult to fill out this paperwork for sure. We just need to tell the truth about everything we heard or saw. We’ll gather in my office in the morning, lay everything out, and try to make some sense of it all.”

The following morning:

“Let’s start with the chopper crew. I know you don’t have a lot but give us what you saw.”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” said Sergeant Jones. “We followed you for a good part of the maze until you went under a thick tree canopy. At that point, we

circled for a while, but we didn't see any other activity. We got your transmission at 1530 hours that you were coming out. At 1600 hours, we laid eyes on you and followed you out. We were on the ground at 1700 hours."

"You're sure about the times?" I asked.

"Yes sir," answered Sergeant Jones. "As you can see in our report, both Officer Hazzard and I confirmed those times."

"Why, Lieutenant?" asked Detective Wallace. "Do you have something different?"

"Yes. My notes say three hours earlier for all times."

Bill and I just looked at each other, and then we made eye contact with Officers Mills and Wainwright.

"All right, Sergeant Jones, you and Officer Hazzard can go. If we think of anything else to ask you, we'll call you. Naomi, you say everything seemed normal from the mobile unit ... except for a slight hiccup in the GPS signal at 0903 hours?"

“Yes sir,” said Naomi. “That momentary signal loss only lasted about five seconds. I saw nothing else.”

“Okay, thanks, Naomi. You can go.”

“Lieutenant,” said Officer Wainwright. “The clothes we brought back do match descriptions in the missing persons paperwork. Here are the individuals’ names for those clothes.”

“According to the church archives,” said Detective Wallace. “The maze predated the church and the cemetery. The graveyard was added in front of the maze in 1865. The dates on some of the headstones confirm that time period. The maze sits off the church property, so they’ve never had anything to do with it.”

“I don’t know every species of plant that we encountered,” said Officer Mills. “But the hedges that made up the maze were all plants that existed at that time. The Mr. Lincoln rose that showed the abnormal behavior has only been around since the 1960’s. The open landscaped area undoubtedly contained varieties of a more recent era. The

density of the hedges shows they've been immaculately trimmed for a long time."

"But who?" I posed. "Who has maintained the maze? We've got no witnesses that have ever seen anyone working in there. The strange time anomalies that we experienced seem to lean towards something supernatural. But how is that possible? I've spent my whole career dealing with cold hard facts and live eyewitnesses, not the supernatural."

We sat in silence for a few minutes—each pondering our experience from a wider perspective.

Then Detective Wallace said, "I still feel like I'm about ten years younger. In one sense, that actually makes me feel good."

"You know, I think that is what all those missing people must have thought, too. Only, I don't think they realized that the 'Fountain of Youth' they had discovered had no stopping point. I believe those people kept going back in time until the point

of conception and maybe to the point where they did not exist.”

“That’s hard to fathom, John,” said Bill. “Very hard to grasp, but if it truly was supernatural, then I don’t imagine we will ever grasp it.”

“So, maybe the maze itself has been around for a couple hundred years, but the open area is much more recent?” pondered Officer Wainwright.

“Possibly,” I replied. “That would explain why nothing has ever shown up in the records about strange occurrences before. Historically, it has simply been an intricate landscape design by the original owner of the property. What’s also a little strange is that there is no structure or evidence of a structure ever being on the property. It seems unusual to me that someone would put in a maze such as this in the middle of nowhere.”

“So, on first appearances, it looks all too innocent, but it turns out otherwise,” said Detective Wallace. “And that otherwise is supernatural.”

“I can think of at least a hundred other questions, Bill,” I said. “But they can probably never be

answered. It's like you said, if it truly is something supernatural, then we will probably never grasp it."

"You know, John, I can see a lot of symbolic parallels with the whole picture," said Detective Wallace.

"What do you mean?"

"In the open area of the maze, time seemed to move exponentially fast towards the center, but in a backwards direction. We saw no evidence of it, but I think that we could assume it does the same coming from the center until you reach the edge of the maze. Then it slows down to a point where growth of the hedges is so slow that they never need trimming. When we are young, time seems to move so slowly that we can't wait to grow up—kind of like a loaded freight train going uphill. When we are old, time seems to move so fast that we wonder where it went—like that same locomotive flying downhill. So, the concept of time is, again, all backwards. Then we have to look at where the maze exits—into a graveyard, someplace that all who exit will end up. The exit for the

cemetery passes under the huge stone cross with the pillars. In Christianity, belief is that Christ overcame death giving us new life in heaven. So, the cemetery exits under the cross and into the church school yard filled with young kids just starting their life.”

“That’s very interesting, Bill, and ... I ... I can understand what you are saying. The problem is that metaphysics is not an option when filing our report. Just the facts as we understood them. We’ve also got to be able to tell the family members of the missing persons something that will give them closure. And I haven’t quite figured that out yet.”

“I agree, John,” said Detective Wallace. “We will have to have something plausible.”

“By the way, Bill. Your mustache is still black.”

“Yeah, I know. But in all that backwards time, my muscles grew slower than Wainwright’s. How do you explain that?”

“I’m not even going to try, Bill.”

ROCKS, MORE ROCKS, AND A FEW CACTI

Clive Henderson hailed from the state of 10,000 lakes, Minnesota, that is. By all known accounts, he led a normal, middle-class life as a bachelor. What possessed him to move to an isolated cabin in the desert remains a mystery. He never really confided in anyone in his decision.

Clive's cabin sat at the bottom of some rocky cliffs, so his backyard was all rock and his front yard all sand. He carried a strong belief that we should do everything we can to preserve our natural resources. How much that played into his move, again, we don't know. Some have debated the classification of rocks and sand as natural resources, but however you classify them, Clive had plenty to conserve.

After discussing the rules of time-sharing with the rattlesnakes and scorpions, Clive had time to focus on landscaping the area around his cabin. Looking at the plants growing in the area near his

cabin, he concluded that his choices ran from cactus to more cactus. So, with his front yard elegantly landscaped with a few cacti, he moved on to the backyard.

After studying the ground in his backyard, Clive concluded that his choices for growing plants ran in the range of nothing to practically nothing. Not one to give up easily, he inserted the flash drive into his computer that contained the plant encyclopedia that he had built from internet research. He found several plants that would grow on rock, or at least in the crevices of rock. Trying to find suppliers would have to wait until he got a satellite dish installed.

Exploring the cliffs and rocky hills behind his cabin became his next ‘to do’. He began collecting little samples of the many shapes, textures, and colors of rocks. Oddly, the rocks struck his horticultural fancy. He started to think of all the things he could do with rock gardening. Looking at all the photos of plants in his plant encyclopedia, he envisioned creating pieces of art depicting plants built from rock. With a little shaping work using a

grinding tool, he found he could create some pretty good likenesses of leaves, flowers, and fruit. The wide palette of colors and textures from his rock collection added to his creative inspiration.

After completing the rock landscape in his backyard, Clive decided to build some rock models to sell. With his pickup truck and trailer fully loaded with his creations, he made the long trip to the farmer's market of the nearest large city. With attractive pricing, Clive managed to sell everything he had that first day.

Buoyed with confidence, Clive continued creating likenesses of plants and trees from rock. He added a line of pots to his inventory.

Clive Henderson's Rocks, Inc. shone as the perfect example of making do with what you have. It was a lonely life, though. Rocks offer little in the way of conversation. Whenever he made it into the farmer's market with his creations, it seemed as though people only wanted to talk about his rock products. When he got back home, he had his co-inhabitants, the rattlesnakes and scorpions, but they

weren't exactly the warm and fuzzy types. He did eventually buy a dog for companionship, who he naturally named "Rocky".

After a while, he found himself talking to the cacti in his front yard. His success in the rock business left him little time to care for his cacti, but they were largely an independent lot. One day when he walked outside to have one of his "cactus" conversations, he noticed what appeared to be a root sucker emerging from the base of a big prickly pear. As he got closer, he saw that the pup was bright purple with white variegation. Fascinated by this apparent mutation, he separated it from the mother plant and potted it up. After several months, several more purple and white pads grew on the pup.

Feeling like a proud papa, he took the pup with him on his next sales trip. Using it as a table decoration, he had numerous people offer to buy it. Clive just couldn't part with his baby, and it remained a table decoration. Later in the afternoon, a man came up to the table and closely examined the purple and white prickly pear. He identified

himself as a professor of horticulture at the state university. After hearing the plant's story, the professor offered to help Clive get a patent for the mutated plant. Eventually the patent went through and *Opuntia ficus-indica* 'Rocky Road' gained worldwide attention. He even built a statue model of it using amethyst that he had in plentiful supply from his mountain.

Back in Minnesota, Clive's old buddies started wondering how their old friend was doing out in the lonely desert. On a crisp autumn morning while out in a boat on a misty, cool lake waiting for the fish to bite, Jess Harper started the first of many rumors about Clive. His fellow anglers then saw it as an opportunity to add their own tales about Clive. It is an unwritten rule that spreading rumors and telling tall tales is quite permissible while fishing. Sorting out truth from the fiction of fishing stories can be challenging to an outsider. To fishermen, they are often one and the same.

At the end of the day, Clive's old buddies came to the unanimous conclusion that Clive simply had rocks in his head. In some ways, they

could be right, but perhaps they were just incapable of grasping the vision that Clive had. The elderly gentleman who ran the fish camp on Lake Winachi brought an old saying to the table when trying to understand the man— “There are none so blind as those who will not see.”

A VIOLA VOLUNTEER

Emma Davis had a small rectangular area out front along her driveway that she always kept filled with flowers. With fall coming on, she purchased a trunk load of garden mums to plant in her spot. With an ample supply to pick from at the home improvement store, she came home with yellow, gold, white, purple, and maroon to create a color mass.

Several weeks passed and Emma's mums were filling in nicely. One morning, while weeding the mum bed, she noticed a purple flower on a small weed beneath a mum. She reached down to pull the weed and stopped. For that little weed she was about to pull quickly became recognizable as a little viola. It had been almost a year since she had any violas in the bed, yet there one was. A dainty volunteer soon to be overpowered by mums; a timid little plant fighting for life; a plant out of place and not part of the master plan; a little seedling hoping its one little flower would bring rescue.

What could Emma do but gently dig it up and plant it in a clay pot by her back porch. The little plant responded to its freedom by completely filling the pot to overflowing. Proving most unique, the one little seedling produced an abundance of flowers with nary a one the same color or pattern. As a lonely volunteer, perhaps the little viola just felt it had something to prove. Emma felt a great deal of satisfaction every morning as she walked onto her back porch. In fact, the viola's entrance into the world motivated Emma to change the way she planted her flower bed. She decided to always keep it a random mix of flowers. That way, if another volunteer sprouted, it could always just bloom where it planted itself.

Something else changed in Emma's life. One morning as she watered the orchids on her back porch, she looked at her viola and sat down. Life is strange sometimes—why some things make us think about or remind us of something else. For Emma, the lone viola reminded her of her own life growing up as an orphan. The very next day she went to the children's home in the neighboring big

city. She soon found a home there and felt a great deal of satisfaction with her volunteer work. Perhaps, in some way, she could help one of the kids bloom like her viola.

Of course, one shouldn't always expect such noble revelation when weeding in your garden, though I have found it a good time to think. A man named Jack Kramer once said, "The word miracle aptly describes a seed." While I'm not sure the author of that quote had any parallel meaning in mind, it sure seemed to fit in Emma's case.

BRAIN WARS

Five, four, three, two, one— “Live from Rainbow Springs, it’s Brain Wars,” announced the baritone voiced director. The studio audience hit their cue with a thunderous round of applause.

Dashing out on stage, a nattily dressed gentleman raised his arms, and the audience once again broke out in applause.

“And your host, Mr. Bob ‘Go for Broke’ Morgan,” continued the director.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” said the much-admired host. “Welcome to Brain Wars, the quiz show that has many of the finest minds in the world standing on edge. Get those cerebrums warmed up and let’s have a party. I’d like to introduce my lovely assistant, Miss Bambi Bambusa ... Come on now, folks, let’s hear it for Bambi ... What do you say, audience? Are you ready?”

Miss Bambi held up a sign that said, “We’re ready, Bob”, and the audience followed her prompting.

“Okay, then,” said Bob ‘Go for Broke’ Morgan. “Our returning champion is Mr. Morris Calabash from Hole-in-the-Wall, Texas. Come on everybody, let’s welcome the man, Rocky Calabash, recently back from his two-week vacation prize at the luxurious Einstein Theory Resort. Well, Rocky, are you ready to meet your opponent?”

“Yes, Bob. I believe I’m up for the challenge.”

As Bambi escorted the new contestant to his podium, Bob said, “Good evening, sir. And your name is?”

“Bob, my name is Dr. Randolph Etherton.”

“Alright, Doc. Where are you from?”

“Bob, I’m from Radcliff, Michigan.”

“What do you do for a living, Randolph?”

“Bob, I’m the chairman of the horticultural department at Franklin University.”

“Well, professor, you’ve got quite a competitor in Rocky, tonight,” said Bob. “Are you ready to test your brain, Doc?”

“I certainly am, Bob.”

“Okay, Miss Bambi, may I have the envelope, please?”

As Bob opened the envelope, Bambi wrote the category on the board. “Alright, our category tonight is ‘The Garden’. Well, that’s right up your alley, Professor. Rocky, it could be a tough battle for you tonight. Professor, as the challenger, you have the first question. This plant is in the Zygo-phyllaceae family and goes by the common name of Caltrop. Can you give its binomial scientific name?”

“Yes, Bob. That would be *Kallstroemia maxima*.”

“That is correct, Professor. You have the first point.”

Bambi hung a number 1 on the professor’s podium as Bob turned to Rocky. “Okay, Morris, I

mean, Rocky. You are up to bat. Your question is, what rose is named after President Abraham Lincoln?”

“Is this a trick question, Bob?”

“No, Rocky.”

“I know this, Bob. My cousin, Virgil, just paid me back the five bucks he owed me, and it had a picture of Mister Lincoln on it.”

“That’s absolutely correct, Rocky, Mister Lincoln.”

Miss Bambi held up the applause sign and then hung a number 1 on Rocky’s podium.

From out of the back of the audience a woman yelled out, “Yee-haw, Rocky. Atta boy!”

Pointing to the woman, Rocky said proudly, “That there’s my wife, Hannah Mae. Hey Hannah.”

“Okay, we’re all tied up at 1 to 1. Back to you, Professor. Miss Bambi has a chemical formula on the blackboard— $(\text{NH}_4)_2 \text{SO}_4$. Can you tell us what chemical that is and how it is used?”

“Yes, Bob. That would be ammonium sulfate, and it is used as a fertilizer.”

“That’s it, Professor.”

As Bambi hung a number 2 on the professor’s podium, Bob turned to Rocky again. “Alr-r-r-right, Rocky. Are you ready for question number 2?”

“Let er rip, Bob.”

“Hank Williams, Jr. is a famous country music star. His father was quoted as saying ‘You got to have smelt a lot of mule manure before you can sing like a hillbilly’. Well, Rocky, it looks like you’ve got a fertilizer question, too. Okay, Rocky, can you tell us Hank Williams, Jr’s father’s name?”

Rocky folded his arms and then put one hand up to his chin, as if in deep concentration. “We had an old boy back in Hole-in-the-Wall who was named junior, and his father’s name was the same.”

“I need your answer, Rocky.”

“I’m gonna take a stab in the dark on this one, Bob. I think it would be Hank Williams.”

“That’s absolutely correct.”

Bambi held up the applause sign and hung a number 2 on Rocky's podium.

From the back of the audience came, "Yee-haw, atta boy, Rocky."

"Okay, Professor, it's back to you one more time. This is a fill-in-the-blank. In the process known as photophosphorylation, the trapping of light energy occurs by the conversion of _____ to _____."

"Hmm, Bob, I believe that would be adenosine biphosphate to adenosine triphosphate."

"Oh, Professor, that was so close. The answer is adenosine diphosphate, not biphosphate. I'm sorry. I can't give you that point."

"That's what I meant to say, Bob. It was just a slip of the tongue."

Bambi grabbed the microphone and said, "A-a-a-w-w-w."

"Okay, Rocky. It's all up to you. If you get this point, you win the war. Are you ready?"

"I'm just filled with trepidation, Bob."

“Hang in there, big guy. This is also a fill-in-the-blank. When a man manually removes the husk from the corn cob, he _____ the corn.”

Rocky fidgeted about, shifted from one foot to the other, and scratched his head. Then he tugged on his right ear, put his hands in his pockets, and closed his eyes.

“This is it, Rocky,” said Bob. “Don’t blow it.”

“Aw, shucks. I sure wish I ... I knew.”

“That’s it, Rocky ... ‘Shucks’. You are still our champion.”

Bambi held up the applause sign and hung a number 3 on Rocky’s podium.

From out of the back of the audience came, “Yee-haw, atta boy, Rocky.”

“Come on over here, Rocky. Hannah Mae, why don’t you come on up here, too. Oh, come on now folks, let’s hear it one more time for Morris ‘Rocky’ Calabash. Okay, let’s see what you’ve won this time. Bambi, may I have the envelope, please. Oh, Rocky, this is nice. Really nice. You and your

lovely wife, Hannah Mae, have won an all-expenses paid trip to the National Corn Shucking Contest. In addition to that, we also have for you, your very own, personalized ‘Big Bucket of Raisins’.”

“I’m too choked up to talk, Bob.”

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, there you have it. Another week. Another returning champion. Remember, always use a big word when a small one would do. Until next time, from all of us here at Brain Wars, be good and love your mother!”

A WALK THROUGH THE POTS

There once was a man named Bill.
Of winter gray, he'd had his fill.
The span of years had taken its toll.
His legs fell still, but not his soul.

On yet another dreary day,
Bill chose to travel a different way.
When all about were bitter and cold,
Bill lined his path with nature's gold.

His way now filled with lots and lots
Of wondrous, beautiful flower pots.
Though surely a most colorful route,
Yet, pain and strife it's not without.

For now, his chair is on wheels.
Yet, Bill humbly takes what life deals.
Take courage from within your heart,
Of something better, it's just a start.

So, as you walk your path today,
Know that Bill was oft to say,
What time you've left, enjoy the ride
Until you reach the other side.

LAST CHANCE VENTURE CAPITALIST

Seymour Fanning always seemed a little odd to his classmates in high school. That oddity led him to his eventual career. While not high on the popularity scale, he ranked very high when it came to working with numbers. With numerous financial successes, he managed to amass a substantial fortune. He did have one early, complete business disaster, and it haunted him. He vowed to never let a lack of capital be the source of entrepreneurial failure again. He did not limit his vow to his own efforts, as he extended it to other aspiring profit-makers too. Thus, Last Chance Venture Capitalist was born.

I am pleased to say that Mr. Fanning allowed me to sit in on a typical day with applicants for financial funding in his office. At 9:00 am, Justin McDougal sat down in front of Seymour's desk.

“Good morning, Mr. McDougal,” said Seymour. “Mr. Thornton, here, will be sitting in on our interview today. I trust you will not have a problem with that?”

“No, no, it’s perfectly alright,” replied Mr. McDougal.

“Okay, your application says you want to open a restaurant,” said Seymour. “Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Mr. McDougal. “I’m going to call it McDougal’s.”

“What type of cuisine were you going to offer?”

“Primarily, hamburgers, chicken nuggets, and French fries,” said Mr. McDougal.

“I see,” said Seymour. “There are already quite a few hamburger restaurants out there. What would make yours different?”

“Our specialty hamburger would be multiple layers with a special sauce, and we would call it a Big MacD.”

“Mr. McDougal, that sounds an awful lot like McDonald’s. Are you aware of the restaurant chain with that name?”

“Oh, sure, but that’s McDonald’s and we would be McDougal’s. Our hero would be a clown with a blue nose and floppy blue shoes. They have golden arches, and we would have golden corn cobs. Plus, we would only serve lettuce and tomatoes grown in California, as well as only potatoes grown in Idaho.”

“And you figure those would be the selling points?” asked Seymour.

“Oh, absolutely,” answered Mr. McDougal.

“I see,” said Seymour. “Well ... it appears as though all your paperwork is in order, and we will give your application due consideration. You should receive a reply in 7 to 10 business days.”

“Oh ... uh ... okay,” said Mr. McDougal. “Uh ... thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Miss Jones, could you please send in the next applicant.”

“Yes, sir,” answered Miss Jones. “Mr. Atherton is on his way.”

“Welcome, Mr. Atherton. Please have a seat.”

“Thank you,” replied Mr. Atherton.

“Okay, it says here that you want to open an apple orchard in South Florida. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Mr. Atherton.

“Where have you lived most of your life, Mr. Atherton?” inquired Seymour.

“Fergus Falls, Minnesota.”

“I’ve heard it can get rather cold there and, of course, South Florida is a tropical climate. That would be quite a change. What made you decide on this particular northern crop for a hot, humid tropical locale like South Florida?”

“It was actually my brother-in-law’s idea. He recently returned from a vacation in South Florida,

and he has been churning out ideas left and right since then.”

“Oh, what does your brother-in-law do for a living?” asked Seymour.

“He’s a taxidermist.”

“And you trust your brother-in-law in such matters?”

“Yes, sir,” said Mr. Atherton. “It has been amazing what he has come up with on his return. There have been things that I never would have thought possible before.”

“Did something happen while he was in Florida?” asked Seymour.

“Yes, sir. He has had tremendous revelation since the incident.”

“The incident?”

“Yes. On the last day of his South Florida vacation, he was walking under a coconut palm and a coconut fell on his head.”

“So, he has gotten all kinds of good ideas, including an apple orchard in South Florida, since the coconut fell on his head?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” answered Mr. Atherton.

“I see,” said Seymour. “Well ... it appears as though all your paperwork is in order, and we will give your application due consideration. You should receive a reply in 7 to 10 business days.”

“Oh ... uh ... okay,” said Mr. Atherton. “Uh ... thank you.”

“Well, I think we have time for one more interview before lunch,” said Seymour. “Miss Jones, could you please send in the next applicant.”

“Ah, good morning, Mr. Frazier,” said Seymour.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Okay, I see that you want to open a weed farm. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“By weed, are you referring to marijuana?” asked Seymour.

“Oh, no, sir,” answered Mr. Frazier. “I mean all kinds of weeds. You know, like what grow in lawns and landscape beds.”

“I see,” said Seymour. “And you feel there would be a big demand for weeds?”

“Yes, sir,” replied Mr. Frazier. “I have done a great deal of research on the matter. I believe it is all a matter of supply and demand.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, sir,” said Seymour. “But aren’t weeds something that most people want to get rid of rather than purchase?”

“That’s the beauty of it,” said Mr. Frazier. “I can’t find any other weed supplier out there. So, I would have a virtual monopoly on the market. Now, since the herbicide market is quite lucrative and if all the herbicides work as well as they advertise them, then pretty soon all the weeds will be killed. If all the weeds are dead, then the herbicide manufacturers won’t have a market for their weed

killers. So, in order to keep selling herbicides, they will have to have more weeds.”

“And being the only weed farm out there, they will have to come to you,” stated Seymour.

“Exactly.”

“Well, I can certainly see the rationale for such an endeavor, Mr. Frazier. I will give your application to our staff horticulturist to review. We will give your application due consideration, and you should receive a reply in 7 to 10 business days.”

“Oh ... uh ... thank you,” said Mr. Frazier. “Thank you.”

“It is lunchtime, Mr. Thornton, and I am hungry,” said Seymour. “I have a powerful hankering for a Big Mac at McDonald’s. Would you care to join me?”

“I appreciate the offer, Mr. Fanning, but I heard they serve lettuce there from Florida. Thank

you for allowing me to bear witness to some future entrepreneurs.”

“You are quite welcome, Mr. Thornton. Did you find this session enlightening?”

“Quite,” I replied. “Quite.”

BLUEBERRY TRAIL

Fresh out of college, I began my venture into gainful employment as a writer for *The World of Gardening* magazine. My first assignment took me to the Loudersburg Flower and Garden Festival. Boasting of over a hundred vendors plus eateries and exhibits, it occupied over ten acres of ground. Making copious notes and taking hundreds of pictures, I felt confident I could produce a good article on the event.

As the day neared end, I reached the last row of vendors. On that last row, I came across a booth for the 'Blueberry Trail', a small farm specializing in, of course, blueberries. The banner across the top of the tent said they grew over seventy varieties of blueberries. The banner, with its colorful array of blueberries in baskets, held my attention but briefly. Standing behind the table of the booth, an absolutely gorgeous young woman in a blue floral cotton dress and straw hat handed me a brochure.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I apologize for staring. Has anyone ever told you that you have the most beautiful blue eyes?”

“Um ... not in the last hour,” she replied, smiling a beautiful smile. “Would you like to sample some blueberries?”

“Uh ... blueberries?” I managed.

“Yes, blueberries,” she said. “It’s what I grow.”

“Oh, yeah, blueberries ... sure.”

“Grandma’s Delight is particularly sweet,” she said.

“Mmm. That’s about the sweetest blueberry I’ve ever tasted.”

She just smiled.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said. “My name’s Josh Williams. I’m a writer for *The World of Gardening* magazine and I’m doing a feature story on the festival today.” Reading the name on the flyer, I asked, “And are you Katie?”

“Yes. Katie O’Donnell.”

“I’m going to have to work in a plug for Grandma’s Delight and the ‘Blueberry Trail’ in my article.”

She just smiled.

By that time, several other people were standing in front of the table, so I said, “I’ll let you attend to your other customers. It was a pleasure meeting you, Katie.”

“And you, Joshua Williams.”

Spending the next day in my motel room organizing my notes and relaxing, I eventually called my boss and convinced him it would be good to stay over on Monday and pay a visit to the ‘Blueberry Trail’. I felt there might be another good story there, and it would be wise to pursue it further. Of course, the thought of seeing the beautiful young woman named Katie O’Donnell again highly influenced my pursuit, but it never hurts to know more about blueberries.

On Monday morning, I stopped at a convenience store on Route 45 to gas up and buy some gum. The store/gas station reminded me of a Norman Rockwell painting, complete with mom and pop behind the counter.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said to the gentleman ringing up my gum. “I’m looking for the ‘Blueberry Trail’ farm. Am I getting close?”

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “Keep heading east and it will be the second driveway on the right, just past the feed store.”

“Okay, great. Uh, thank you.”

“Do you like blueberries, son?”

“Uh ... blueberries? Oh yeah, blueberries. I’m particularly fond of the O’Donnell variety, I mean the Grandma’s Delight variety.”

The old man winked, nodded, and said, “Be careful.”

As I walked out the door, I thought to myself, “Why would he say, ‘Be careful’?”

A sign for ‘Blueberry Trail’ clearly marked the second driveway on the right. The single dirt lane had the classic small farm look, with rows and rows of blueberry plants flanking both sides of the lane. Immaculately mowed strips of what looked like a clover separated the alternating rows of medium size plants and dwarfs. Occasionally, a row of plants trained as small trees would interrupt the pattern. Each row had a small sign at its entrance along the drive that named the variety of blueberry. The driveway ended in a large circle with an ornate fountain gushing with crystal clear water. A wide grassy border outside the circle appeared to be where visiting cars found their resting place.

When I got out of my car, I noticed a couple walking a meandering trail through blueberries interspersed with abundant flowering annuals. A small sign at the entrance to the trail confirmed what my little gray cells had already deduced—this was Blueberry Trail. I began to follow the trail in isolation but soon noticed numerous other people ahead of me when a break in the bend of the trail revealed them. The plantings on both sides of the

trail had ample signs identifying the species and variety of its residents. As a bonus, so to speak, hand-painted signs with flower and bird borders offered selections of botanical witticisms. The trail had no side paths and no intersections, so no traffic decisions were called for. After a while, I came upon a sign that had an “S” shape on it with an arrow on each end of the snake. A narrow gap split the “S” about halfway through its length. Intrigued by the wordless sign, I had to think about it for a couple of minutes. I believed it conveyed the message that one was at the halfway point of the trail, and it was the same distance whether you turned back or kept ahead. On the back side of the sign, it said ‘halfway point’. I smiled and looked in all directions, wondering whether someone might be watching and gathering amusement from behind some tall bush.

A short distance away, I could see a petite lady talking to another couple up by a greenhouse. The blue floral dress and straw hat that she wore matched that of my memory from the festival. She had her back to me, though, so I couldn’t be totally

sure. Finishing the trail, I walked over to the greenhouse where I found her working inside.

Walking up behind her, I said, “How are you today, Katie O’Donnell?”

She turned towards me and replied, “I’m doing just fine. How about you, Joshua Williams?”

I stood speechless. The woman who answered and now faced me was very old and not the beautiful young woman that I met at the festival.

“I know, you’ve come back for more Grandma’s Delight blueberries. Right?”

“I ... uh ... I’m sorry. I thought you were Katie O’Donnell. Uh ... how did you know my name?”

“I am Katie O’Donnell, and I knew your name because I met you at the flower and garden festival. You’re a writer, aren’t you?”

Frantically searching my brain for some tactful way to say, “But you’re not the beautiful young woman from the flower and garden festival”, all I could manage was, “I ... uh ... was heading home,

and I thought I'd just drop by and see the 'Blueberry Trail' up close."

"Well, what do you think?" she asked.

"It's great ... How long have you had the place?"

"I've lived here and worked this land for over 40 years."

"Well ... you've certainly done a remarkable job with it. I really like the meandering trail."

"I'm glad to hear that. It's a lot of work, but it gives me great pleasure. Sometimes I feel like a young woman again when I'm working with all the plants and beautiful flowers."

"I can believe that, Katie. Well, look ... I need to be going, but it was really nice to be able to see everything."

"Thanks for coming, Joshua Williams."

"Goodbye, Katie."

"Goodbye."

When I got back to my car, I just sat there. I suppose it would be reasonable that I should wonder if I'm losing my mind. But if I'm losing my mind, then it wouldn't be reasonable. How could I have possibly mistaken the young, beautiful woman at the festival for the elderly woman at the farm? Suddenly, the words of the man at the convenience store hit me. Is what I've experienced what he meant by 'Be careful'? Could someone question their own sanity just by visiting 'Blueberry Trail'? If the man could issue the warning, then there must have been others before me that have succumbed to whatever exists there.

'Blueberry Trail' looked like a typical small farm being operated by an elderly woman who had lived there most of her life. She had the same beautiful blue eyes that sparkled as the woman at the festival. From the limited knowledge that I had of her, she seemed like a good, kind person. I thought if I visited the farm, I could learn more and craft a story about the beautiful, young woman who owned it. My expectations led to some

disappointment, but then maybe my perspective on beauty couldn't face the challenge.

I started the car and backed out onto the driveway. I needed to call my boss and tell him that there really wasn't a story here after all. I remember one of my journalism professors saying, "You'll know you are on your way to becoming a good journalist when you can smell a good story, even though not everything meets the eye." If there was a good story here, I couldn't smell or see it. Whether that means there truly wasn't a story here or whether I was still a long way from becoming a good journalist, I'm not sure.

Before I started the drive back down the path to the road, I glanced at the rearview mirror and saw the elderly Katie O'Donnell take a drink from the tall, ornate flowing fountain in the middle of the circular driveway. When she walked away from the fountain, she appeared to have an unusual spring in her step—a spring normally seen in someone much younger.

CONVERSATIONS IN THE GARDEN

“Hi, there.”

“Are you talking to me?”

“Why, yes, of course.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard a talking plant before.”

“That’s okay. I’ve never heard a talking squirrel before either. Well, I take that back. I’ve heard you chattering on the fence sometimes when that cat comes around. But I must assume that it is in your native language, because I certainly couldn’t understand what you were saying.”

“Yes. That cat can be so annoying sometimes. I don’t think he speaks squirrel either, because he never seems to grasp what I’m saying to him ... Do you only speak English?”

“Yes, I’m an English Rose.”

“Not from around here then? I think this is Florida.”

“I’m from England originally, but I love it here in Florida, which comes from a Spanish word for ‘full of flowers’, by the way.”

“Really? I guess I should pay more attention. I was born down inside that Live Oak tree over there. Perhaps you’ve seen my sister and I peek out from those holes in the trunk?”

“No, I’m sorry, I’ve never noticed. Sometimes I’m not very observant, you know, what with having to put out these beautiful flowers and all. It can distract you from other things.”

“Yeah. I’m not big on flowers. Now, you take nuts. I can get crazy for nuts. My home tree, the Live Oak, produces ample nuts for my family. Sometimes I like to get out and try something different, though. They serve some delicious peanuts and sunflower seeds here. You have to get here early, though, before the grackles and blue jays hog it all. If I’m running a little late and there aren’t

many peanuts left, I must hustle—grabbing one, burying it, and then going back for another. I hope I haven't disturbed your roots while burying them."

"No, no. You've been fine, although I've always wondered what you were doing. Is that one of the sunflowers over there?"

"Yeah, some of those grackles can get pretty messy, flicking seed all over the place. That one probably grew from one of those that the grackles threw over there. You do what you gotta do around here. I just hope I can remember where I buried all the peanuts."

"Is that a peanut plant sprouting over there?"

"Yeah, it looks like it. I must have forgotten about that one."

"Do you like my flowers? We English Roses have a lot more petals and petaloids than many other roses."

"Petaloids? What are those?"

"Petaloids are modified leaves that have the form or appearance of petals."

“Okay. That’s probably more than I need to know, but yes, you have beautiful petals and petals ... petals ...”

“Petaloids.”

“Yeah, petaloids ... Do any of these other plants around here talk?”

“Why, yes. They all do, except for maybe that shrinking English Violet over there. She’s kind of shy ... Don’t all squirrels talk?”

“Yes, I suppose they do.”

“Hey, Tex,” said the English Rose. “Have you met Mr. Squirrel?”

“Howdy,” said Tex. “I don’t reckon I’ve had the pleasure, pardner. It’s *Leucophyllum frutescens*, but my friends just call me Tex, short for Texas Sage.”

“Okay,” said the squirrel.

“Psst,” whispered Tex. “Your friend doesn’t talk much, does he, Rosy?”

“I think he’s probably still in shock from learning that plants can talk.”

“I reckon you know best, Rosy.”

A gentle breeze began to blow, and a screen door slapped against its frame ever so gently. An elderly lady walked towards the garden carrying a green pail.

The squirrel flicked his tail rapidly and said, “Sorry, Miss Rose, but I gotta amscray.”

The squirrel jumped on top of the neighbor’s fence and traveled its length, then jumping on the next neighbor’s fence and the next, until he was out of sight.

“Amscray?” questioned Miss Rose. “What does that mean? I’ve never heard that in English before.”

“I believe it is a foreign language called Pig Latin,” interjected the Azalea.

“Pig Latin?” asked Miss Rose. “Well, I guess we won’t ever know what he meant.”

“Now, hold on there, Rosy,” said Tex. “If I’m not mistaken, I think Mr. Hickory over there might be able to help us. I think I heard some people calling him a pignut, which might mean he knows how to speak Pig Latin.”

“Oh,” said Miss Rose. “Oh, Mr. Hickory, hello.”

“Are you calling me, madam?” answered the hickory in a deep voice.

“Why, yes,” said Miss Rose. “Do you speak Pig Latin?”

“Madam, I am a *Carya glabra*. I speak Pig Latin, as well as four other languages.”

“Good,” said Miss Rose. “What does am-scray mean?”

“Arrivederci,” answered the hickory.

Miss Rose and Tex tilted their branches in a puzzled kind of way.

“Sayonara,” said the hickory.

“Jumpin’ horny toads!” exclaimed Tex. “Don’t you know what it means in English?”

“Scram,” replied the hickory.

“Oh, I get it,” said Miss Rose. “He left because Lady Wilkerson came out.”

“Lord have mercy,” said Tex. “Why didn’t he just say that in the first place?”

“Look, Tex,” said Miss Rose. “Lady Wilkerson has someone with her.”

“Yeah, kinda looks like a young sprout,” replied Tex.

When Lady Wilkerson reached the garden, she said, “Good morning, all my lovelies. Ah, Miss Rose, I believe you have outdone yourself this morning—one, two ... seventeen glorious flowers (Miss Rose held her foliage and her flowers erect with pride after Lady Wilkerson’s inspection). And you, Tex, you still look as tough as nails in this dry weather (Tex kind of flexed his branches for Lady Wilkerson to see).

“Grandma, are you really talking to the plants?” asked Becky.

“I sure am,” answered Lady Wilkerson.

“And they answer you back?”

“They most certainly do.”

“I can’t hear them, Grandma,” said Becky.

“Well, this garden is like most any other garden, except it’s my garden. And all these plants are my friends. Now, you and I are friends, aren’t we, Becky?”

“Yes, Grandma.”

“When we talk, I can hear you and you can hear me, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, in the garden, when I talk to my friends, they can hear me just like you can hear me. But when the plants talk back to me, they are silent. I can’t hear them talk, but I can see them talk.”

“I’m confused, Grandma.”

“Come, let me show you, Becky ... let’s take Miss Rose, here. When I came out here this morning, she told me that she was very happy.”

“I didn’t hear her say that,” said Becky.

“But remember what I said. She speaks in silence. Look at her and tell me why you think she might say, ‘I’m very happy this morning’.”

“Well, she has lots of pretty flowers this morning ... so, I guess ... that is how she says, ‘I’m very happy, this morning’.”

“You did not hear her talk, but you saw her talk, didn’t you?”

“Oh ... I get it.”

“And look at old Tex there. It’s been a dry summer and some of the other plants are wilting badly, but not old Tex. Tex is telling me that it’s going to take a lot more than a little dry weather to get him down. His leaves still look strong, and he is still putting out those pretty little purple flowers. Now, look at those zinnias that are wilting. They are saying to me that they are sad. Their leaves are

sagging, and their flowers look wimpy. They are telling me, ‘Please give us some water’. Can you see them talking, too?”

“Yes.”

“And how should we talk back to them?”

“Um ... say you’re sorry while you give them some water?”

“You got it.”

“What about that plant over there? The one with that humongous flower branch.”

“That’s an interesting one, Becky. Do you remember when Grandpa died last year?”

“Yes.”

“We had a funeral for him, and I told you he was going to live with God now. Well, this plant is a cactus, and it is telling us that it is getting ready to die and go up to live in a new garden with God.”

“How is it telling us that, Grandma?”

“When it is getting ready to die, it sends up that ... what did you say?”

“Humongous.”

“That humongous flower stalk. When it is done flowering, it will die. Remember all the flowers we had at Grandpa’s funeral? Well, if you look closely, you can see that this plant has hundreds of little flowers on its stalk. That’s kind of God’s way of sending flowers to its funeral. And look at all its friends, the bees, paying their respect to the cactus. But you know what’s also interesting about this plant when it dies?”

“What’s that, Grandma?”

“Do you remember when all of Grandpa’s kids and grandkids joined hands in a circle around Grandpa’s casket?”

“Yes.”

“Look at all the kids and grandkids in a circle at the base of this cactus.”

“Oh ... that’s kind of like when you said that Grandpa will continue to live when all his children live.”

“Oh, you’re so smart.”

“But before today, I didn’t know how to talk with the garden.”

“Now you do.”

“Now I do.”

THE GARDEN SHOW

With Doc Thomas

Doc: Welcome back to the second half of our show. You're in for a treat. This segment is our annual review of new gardening products. Larry, who's first in line?

Larry: FACA

Doc: FACA? Interesting name ... Okay, let me read some of what the brochure says:

FACA, Floyd's Amazing Compost Additive, is taking the market by storm. Recent university research has shown that its benefits extend far beyond the compost pile as well.

With its super sensitive action, a cupful in your compost pile or spread out over two square feet of ground will unlock nutrients with such speed that you can forget ever having to apply fertilizer again.

Throw away those first-aid kits. Working on a cellular level, a FACA application will instantly cauterize cuts and wounds, relieve headaches, rejuvenate burned skin, and so much more. Buy a bottle of the wilderness scent and you will clamor for this little bottle to use on abdominal and back muscles, allowing you to ditch support belts and heat wraps.

Are you having trouble deciding what to plant in your garden this year? FACA dabbed on the forehead instantly activates brain neurons that have been asleep for years. The ideas that come out of that planning session will amaze you.

Are you worried about damping off or other fungi taking out your little seedlings? Worry no more! When you get ready to plant, just soak your seeds in FACA and never fight with those microscopic beasts again.

Working out in the garden with 90-degree temps and 100 percent humidity? Take an old towel, soak it in FACA, and wrap it around your

head. You'll be good to go for another three hours. Repeat as needed.

Friends, how much would you expect to pay for this miracle product? \$59.95? \$39.95? No ... A bottle of FACA is just \$19.95.

James from Comstock, Georgia writes: Dear Larry, since using FACA, I've increased my garden harvest by over 2,000%. I also use it in my landscape business as a sales aid. I never knew pink flamingos would sell so well in Georgia.

Bart from Long Branch, California says: Larry, they arrested me last month for the 6000 marijuana plants I was growing in my basement with the help of FACA. I took the bonus offer of three "Deceivo" pills before my court appearance, told the judge I thought they were ferns, and he let me go. I didn't lose my investment after all.

Rev. Smiley Farmer, Florida writes: Thanks for sending me this product, Larry. We've used it in many areas of the grounds around our church. As a bonus, a treatment of the altar flowers prior to

my sermon has given me such insight that our pledges have increased over 200%

Doc: Larry, did anybody proofread this? It sounds like a late-night tv commercial.

Larry: I believe it runs between 1:00 AM and 2:00 AM.

Doc: But does it work?

Larry: You heard the testimonials, Doc.

Doc: Next.

Larry: MIAB

Doc: MIAB? Okay, what's it say?

MIAB, Money in a Bottle, is taking the market by storm.

With its super sensitivity action, a little dab on the fingers of your bookkeeper and he or she will be able to work computer keyboards and calculators at such speed that you'll be able to let three other people go and reduce office overhead.

Doc: Larry, what does this have to do with gardening?

Larry: We thought it would be of interest to all the small business landscapers and maintenance guys out there.

Doc: I ... uh, see.

Throw away those first-aid kits and lower your Workers' Comp charges. Working on a cellular level, a MIAB application will instantly cauterize cuts and wounds, relieve headaches, rejuvenate burned skin, and so much more. Buy a bottle of the wilderness scent and your workers will clamor for this little bottle to use on abdominal and back muscles, allowing them to chuck those bulky support belts.

Doc: Wait a minute, Larry. This sounds an awful lot like FACA, our first product.

Larry: The boss said we need some new sponsors.

Doc: I continue.

Are you having a strategy or planning session? MIAB dabbed on the forehead instantly activates brain neurons that have been asleep for years. You'll be amazed at the ideas that come out of that session.

Are you worried about listing your Corvette Stingray on your company's asset and depreciation schedules? Worry no more! When you get ready to send your returns into the IRS, accidentally spill some MIAB on the line that shows the Stingray. When the IRS looks at it, it will read "Irrigation Pump". After seven years, the chemicals in MIAB will break down and Corvette Stingray will reappear as the original line entry.

Friends, how much would you expect to pay for this miracle product? \$59.95? \$39.95? No. This amazing little bottle of liquid money is just \$19.95. The wisest investment you will ever make.

Peter from Brunswick, Georgia writes: Dear Larry, since using the sample of MIAB that you sent me, I've increased my business over 2,000%. I never knew septic tank lids would take off as Mother's Day gifts.

Rev. T.J. “Boney” Watterson, Florida writes: Thanks for sending me this product, Larry. We’ve used it in many areas of parish life and increased our stewardship pledges by 300%.

Bart from Bart’s Landscape and Paving, New York writes: This revolutionary product has made a monster sales associate of the most demure, honest employee on my staff.

Doc: Well, folks. There you heard it. I would consult with your attorney before using this product. If you have any further questions, call Larry here at the station. He’s our producer. What’s next, Larry?

Larry: Jiffy-Sharp.

Doc: Jiffy-Sharp – the finest mower blade sharpening attachment on the market. Larry, who reviewed this product?

Larry: Sam.

Doc: Could you ask Sam to come over here?

Sam: Hi, Doc.

Doc: Ooh, Sam. What happened to your hand?

Sam: Twenty-four stitches.

Doc: Take care of that, my friend ... You reviewed the Jiffy-Sharp?

Sam: Yes, sir. It was pretty easy to install on new or old mowers. It seems like it does the job keeping the mower blade sharp.

Doc: That's good to hear. I'm sure our listeners will consider it.

Sam: One thing, though.

Doc: What's that?

Sam: Don't try to fine tune it with the mower running.

Doc: Or else it's twenty-four stitches?

Sam: Yes, sir.

Doc: Didn't the instructions tell you that?

Sam: I can't read Chinese.

Doc: Okay ... Do we have time for one more, Larry?

Larry: Two minutes, Doc.

Doc: Dave's Power Picker-upper. A heavy-duty gadget, much like those handy fingers, but able to pick up much heavier objects. With a compound leverage handle and a spring-loaded claw, this tool can be used to pick up and carry pots of soil up to thirty-five pounds. You know, I've always wanted something like this. This looks like a good deal, folks. I'm sorry we're out of time but just call in after the show and Tammy will give you a location near you that carries these babies. I promise you – tomorrow's show will be back to normal. Thanks for putting up with us.

THE LIONS ROAR AT DUSK

Driving south on the interstate, I took notice of a lot of semis loaded with sod heading north. I mention that because my wife Helen and I were going to visit her brother Brett in South Florida, and he happens to be in the sod business. We arrived at his home place on Saturday afternoon with heavy rain beating on the windshield. We had to wait about fifteen minutes before we could get out of the car. When the rain finally stopped, I opened the car door, and my first step sank into the waterlogged mud about two inches.

Standing on the front porch, Brett called out, “Welcome to sunny South Florida.”

Helen gave her brother a big hug, and I purposely shook his hand with a firmer than normal grip.

“You really know how to put on a greeting, Brett,” I said.

“Just for you, my friend,” replied Brett.
“Renee will be back in a few minutes. She had to run to the grocery store to pick up some additional supplies, given your healthy appetite, Jack.”

“I have to take advantage of you whenever I can,” I said.

Saturday night was filled with all the usual family stuff – gossip, photo albums and so on.

Sunday morning, we went to First Baptist Church with Brett, Renee, and the kids. Brett frequently introduced us as the ‘black sheep’ of the family – we’re Lutheran.

“I wasn’t sure they would let us in the door, Brett. You know, with our denominational background.”

“Nonsense, my friend. Remember in Luke 5, Jesus was asked, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors, sinners, and Lutherans?’”

“I seem to remember that passage a little differently. You must be quoting from a Baptist Bible.”

“Is there any other?” asked Brett.

I pulled out my little notepad and made a few entries.

“What are you writing?” asked Brett.

“Just a few mementos to use against you later,” I answered.

“What if I die tomorrow before you have a chance to use them?”

“The good thing about these is that they work equally well at funerals.”

Monday morning the girls did their own thing, and Brett took me out for an adventure in his pickup truck. After leaving his home place, we turned onto a narrow, rough highway that was bordered by stout guardrails. Up ahead, we could see a mass of red lights.

“I wonder what’s going on up there, Brett?”

“Oh, they’re probably fishing out another one.”

“Fishing out another one?”

“Yeah, they are always pulling out a car that has gone into the canal. They’ve got about five more miles to go in putting up these guardrails. People drive too fast on this rough, narrow road. Once they’re done with the guardrails, they’re supposed to start resurfacing with new asphalt. But we’ll be turning off before we get to the accident.”

About a quarter mile later, Brett pulled onto a wide rock road on the left.

“I’m going to show you a big operation first. A friend of mine runs this sod farm for a big corporate outfit. They’ve got five thousand acres of pure muckland. This farm is all St. Augustine grass in different varieties. This first block is the Floratam variety. St. Augustine is a spreading type of grass with stolons. You’ll notice that they leave a narrow strip between each row of grass that they harvest. Down at the end of this field you can see a big tractor pulling a large roller that goes over the strips helping to compress them into the muck, so the field stays smooth. Over time, those strips grow back together forming a new plot ready to

harvest. In this next block, you can see the harvester cutting the strips of sod and bringing them up so the workers on the back can stack them onto pallets. Here comes a tractor and wagon unit that will drive onto the field so the forklift can load up the pallets of sod on the wagon. He'll then haul the pallets down to the loading ramp where the trucks are lined up."

"Quite a large, well-run operation," I remarked.

"Yes, a bit of a contrast to what we are doing, though the end result is the same," said Brett.

Leaving the big farm, we got back onto the highway. Another quarter mile and Brett turned right onto an old, but sturdy, narrow wooden bridge that led onto the farm where he was working. I'm glad he was driving, because I probably wouldn't have crossed such a bridge with only a little room to spare on each side of the vehicle.

"There sure are a lot of logs floating in this canal, Brett."

“If you look a little closer, you will see that those floating logs have eyes ... Yeah, alligators.”

The bridge suddenly felt narrower to me.

“What happens if your truck breaks down on this bridge?”

“Well, in these times, we would use the cell phone and call out to somebody in the field to come rescue us. Not that many years ago, though, before there were cell phones, you would have to crawl out the window, make your way to the bed of the truck, and then climb over the top and across the hood. From there, it would be a long walk back to the field to get help.”

“Simple as that, huh?”

“Yes, sir. All the while you would have an audience down there watching for any missteps.”

Back on solid ground, we went about a hundred yards, and Brett pulled off onto a little side path. He sat and waited.

“What are we doing, Brett?”

“Loaded trucks always have the right-of-way.”

“What?”

Thirty seconds later, a fully loaded semi came around the bend and gave us a toot with his air horn.

“Look over there at the edge of the canal, Jack.”

“Are those otters?”

“Yeah, sometimes it’s fun to just sit and watch them for a few minutes. They can be very playful.”

The farm that we were on was owned by a cattle rancher who wanted to refurbish some of his pastures. He contracted with Brett’s company to remove the existing Argentine Bahia grass so he could replant. After so many years, the Bahia grass can get a little woody and be less palatable for the cattle.

Brett prepares the old grass for sod harvesting in multiple stages. The first block we stopped

at had tractors mowing the tall, neglected field. After windrowing and drying, the baler does its work.

The next block, which had already been mowed and baled, had a tractor pulling a trailer with a propane tank and a wide boom that sat very low to the ground. The propane burner set fire to the remaining residue and grass mix. Of course, that could only be done on a calm day with a water tanker running parallel. In a few weeks, the blackened field began sprouting lush new growth.

Then we came to the field where the harvesting crews worked at cutting and stacking the sod on pallets. The trucks pulled directly onto the fields to get loaded.

Bahia grass was in great demand for roadsides, erosion control, and areas with no irrigation because it was so drought tolerant once it became established.

No strips were left behind with Bahia grass, so the rancher could then replant with a pasture of

his choice. Of course, he consulted with the cows for their opinion first.

Brett and I spent the entire day at the field operation while his two brothers managed the retail and installation end of things. While Brett had been doing this kind of work since he was a teenager, and he had the operation running smoothly, there were always problems. He had a sixteen-foot van trailer in the field that he stored spare parts in for the inevitable equipment breakdowns. Sometimes they would hit a patch of sandier soil where the sod pieces wouldn't hold together very well. When a heavy rain came, like we had on Saturday, they often had to use a bulldozer to help push the loaded trucks out of the field.

This day was relatively trouble-free and as dusk came the equipment was turned off and the crews left. Brett and I walked along a fence line headed back to his pickup truck in eerie silence. It had been an interesting day, and I certainly had a better appreciation for that piece of turfgrass that I might buy to fill in a hole in my yard.

When I saw a huge diamondback rattlesnake cross our path some thirty feet ahead, I said, “Whoa!”

“Perhaps I failed to mention about the snakes,” said Brett. “But he’s not paying us any mind as he seems to be in a hurry to get home.”

Pausing until we were sure he was a safe distance away, we continued towards his truck. Suddenly, I heard a loud noise. It startled me so much that I almost tripped and fell.

“What was that, Brett?”

“Oh, that noise?”

“Yes.”

“Lions,” he said succinctly.

“Lions, out here?” I asked nervously. “In South Florida?”

“Yes, I forgot to tell you. This field backs up to a wildlife preserve. The lions are just beyond that brush line.”

“You forgot to tell me about the lions?”

“An insignificant oversight on my part.”

“There is a substantially higher fence than this barbed wire cow fence between us and them, isn’t there?”

“Oh, of course ... Of course ... Unless one happened to ... No, I don’t think that’s happened lately.”

“Is there anything else you forgot to tell me?”

“Quite possibly ... Quite possibly ... But it will probably come to me later.”

Then I heard the lions roar again. This time they sounded much closer. I increased the speed of my pace back to Brett’s truck, while my brother-in-law walked behind me, smiling.

THE LAST GARDEN

“Look, Frank,” said Marjorary. “Even the sides of the rail cars have garden scenes painted on them.”

“It only seems appropriate,” replied Frank.

“Isn’t this exciting, Susan?” exclaimed Marjorary.

“Yes, it certainly is,” answered Susan. “Try to contain yourself, Frank.”

“Whose idea was this, dear sister-in-law?” asked Frank.

“Yours, of course,” said Susan. “I do humbly apologize.”

“And what’s more, whose treat is this?” asked Frank.

“I shall curb my tongue for the rest of the day,” said Susan, with a smile.

“Okay, our tickets say we are supposed to go to the Rose Car,” said Frank. “It looks like that is the next one.”

“You mean the one with roses painted all over the side,” said Susan.

“Unless that is a clue to throw us off track,” responded Frank.

“Welcome to the Gulf Coast Garden Railway,” said the host. “This is the Rose Car, so if your tickets say you are to be here, then you are at the right place. I would like to remind you to always keep your tickets handy as your ticket number is a valuable piece of the puzzle. Your waitress is waiting inside the car to seat you.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Frank.

“Good morning, folks,” said the waitress standing inside the door. “May I see your tickets, please ... Very good, please follow me ... Here is your table, 762, 993, and 455. My name is 898 and I will be serving you this morning.”

“Can we just call you 8 for short?” asked Frank.

“Actually, 455,” replied 898. “My full name is 898-78654356, so 898 is already shortened.”

“Okay,” said Frank.

“May I start you out with some fresh juice from the *Citrus sinensis* or perhaps a cup of *Coffea arabica*?”

“Do you have any juice from the *Lycopersicon esculentum*?” asked Frank.

“Yes, we do, sir,” answered 898. “Large or small?”

“Large, please.”

“Ladies?” asked the waitress.

“I’ll just have water,” said Marjorary.

“Water for me also,” said Susan. “But without the ... uh, uh ...”

“*Citrus limon*,” whispered Frank.

“Yes, without the *Citrus limon*, please,” said Susan. “How do you know all this, Frank? Wait, what is that you’re looking at?”

“Oh, this handy ‘Guide to Plant Names’ booklet for your journey?” answered Frank. “I picked one up in the depot lobby. Well, I did get one for each of you, too.”

“Thanks,” said Susan. “Couldn’t you have given them to us a little earlier?”

“I like to see you struggle a little,” replied Frank.

Taking down the card sitting in the holder of the vase of roses adorning their table, Marjorary said, “What do we have here? It says, ‘The leaf that falls the farthest is at the top of the tree.’ I wonder what that means.”

“That certainly sounds logical,” said Frank.

“Perhaps it is some kind of clue,” added Susan.

“You could be right, Susan,” said Frank. “Remember, the brochure for the railway said surprises were always in order.”

When the waitress came to take their order, Marjorary asked her about the card and what it meant. 898 responded with a shrug of her shoulders.

“That shrug was an answer, whether she meant it to be or not,” said Frank. “I think it is a clue of some kind, so we should keep it handy. Perhaps more will come, and the answer will become clearer.”

When their meals arrived, they unrolled their napkins with the silverware in them. A note fell out of each napkin roll.

“Mine says, ‘A name doesn’t always add up’,” said Susan.

“Mine says the same,” said Marjorary.

“Same here,” said Frank. “Remember, the host said our ticket numbers were a part of the puzzle. What is your ticket number, Marjorary?”

“It’s 762-15,” answered Marjorary. “What’s yours, Susan?”

“993-21,” replied Susan.

“Mine is 455-17,” said Frank.

“Okay, Frank, you are the mathematician of the family,” said Marjorary. “What does it mean?”

Studying the numbers for a minute, Frank then said, “Okay, let’s take the first three numbers of each ticket and add them up. Marjorary, yours are $7+6+2$, which equals 15, and that’s the number that follows the dash.”

“Mine are $9+9+3$, which equals 21, and that is also the number that follows the dash,” said Susan.

“But look at mine,” said Frank. “ $4+5+5$ equals 14, which is not the number that follows the dash. Since the note said, ‘A name doesn’t always add up’ and since our waitress called us by number instead of our name, I figure that my ticket is the clue.”

“But what clue?” asked Susan.

“Okay ... suppose we substitute the corresponding letter of the alphabet for the number,” pondered Frank. “Then Marjorary, yours would be GFB-O. That doesn’t seem to make any sense. Susan, yours would be IIC-U. I don’t get anything there either. Mine would be DEE-Q, which doesn’t seem to mean anything.”

“So, that can’t be it,” said Marjorary.

“Wait, remember, my name is the only one that doesn’t add up, so ... I think we have to ignore the number 17 on my ticket,” said Frank. “What other possible combinations are there in the alphabet for that last number?”

“DEEP ... DEEM ... DEED, to name a few,” said Susan.

“And DEER,” said Frank. “Since this is a garden excursion, I would bet on deer, but I think we should keep them all on the table with our first clue.”

After finishing their meals, Susan got up from the table and said, “I’ll be right back. I need to visit the little girl’s room.” When she got back to

the table, she said, "I've got some more information."

"What's that?" asked Marjorary.

"I talked to another lady back there, and she said they also got some mysterious notes, but they hadn't thought about them as being clues to something. She sounded very interested when I told her what we thought. The thing is, none of their clues were the same as ours."

"Hmm ... that could possibly mean they have a different mystery than ours, or ... maybe we have to collaborate with each other and put all the clues together to solve the puzzle," said Frank. "Did she say what their notes said?"

"No," answered Susan.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced their host. "We will be stopping in about fifteen minutes for our first garden tour of the day. Be sure to gather all the belongings that you wish to bring with you."

When the train reached the depot, they disembarked and then boarded buses for the journey

to the botanical garden, which was about ten miles away. The entrance to the garden dazzled the eye with a mass of color. As they got off the bus, a young lady gave them handouts for the garden.

When Frank opened one of the handouts, he saw a listing of many of the plants living in the garden. The handout had one particular plant highlighted in yellow marker—the Golden Rain Tree.

“Look at this, girls,” said Frank. “Do your handouts have anything highlighted?”

“Yes,” replied Marjorary. “Mine has the Gold Mound Duranta.”

“And mine, the Golden Shrimp Plant,” added Susan. “Just a second, let me talk to that lady I saw earlier.”

When Susan came back, she said, “They have other plants highlighted on their handouts, but none with the word gold or golden.”

“I think, then, that we need to focus on those words,” remarked Frank. “Since the garden tour is self-guided, keep an eye out for those three plants

and let's take a good, hard look at them when we find them. Remember, we have to be back at the bus at noon."

They eventually found all three plants, but they noticed nothing unusual about the plants themselves. The Golden Rain Tree or *Koelreuteria paniculata* had an equal number of yellow blooms and pink seed pods for an interesting combination. The Gold Mound Duranta or *Duranta erecta* 'Gold Mound' formed an interesting color contrast with the dark green Podocarpus behind it and the bright red Geraniums in front of it. The Golden Shrimp Plant or *Pachystachys lutea* was in full bloom with its interesting flowers.

As noon time neared, they headed back to the buses for the return trip to the train depot. When they got back to the train, they walked over to the Rose Car. The host announced to those gathering at the car that they were now going to be boarding the Daisy Car for the next leg of the trip.

“Interesting,” said Frank. “That probably means we get to sample all the different cars and their décor.”

“I like it,” said Marjorary.

For the next four hours, they passed beautiful beaches, thick pine forests, interesting swamps, and Red Maples just beginning to turn color. They had a delicious dinner but received no further clues.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” announced their host. “In ten minutes, we will be arriving at the next depot where we will disembark and head to your accommodations for the night at the Live Oak Hotel. I’m sure you will find the ambiance at the hotel quite fascinating, so enjoy.”

“There she sits, girls,” said Frank, pointing to the clearly visible hotel above the tree line. “It looks like that wide, meandering path is a gardening excursion of its own.”

“Just look at the mass of flowers lining the path!” exclaimed Marjorary.

“I wonder how much time we have before we have to check in?” wondered Susan.

“Take all the time you want,” said the lady walking behind them. “This is all free time for the rest of the day. They know you were on the train, so the check-in is already prearranged. This is our second time here, so we kind of know a little of the process.”

“Well, thank you,” said Susan.

“These solid beds of annuals certainly catch your eye,” remarked Frank. “But you have to look a little deeper to see some interesting solitary plants, too.”

“Uh oh,” said Susan. “We’re coming to a side path. Do we take it?”

“Of course,” answered Marjorary.

“I’ve got a feeling the designers will have us reach our destination whichever path we take,” said Frank.

“But I don’t want to miss anything,” said Susan.

“Look about ten feet ahead of you, Susan,” said Frank. “There’s another path coming out. I bet that’s where this side path comes back out, so you don’t have to miss anything.”

“Good,” said Susan.

Clicking away with his camera, Frank said, “I love it. They have everything labeled.”

“And the labels themselves are interesting,” said Marjorary.

“Yeah, they look custom made,” said Frank. “I bet they make them right here on the premises. I was reading a little bit about the history of this hotel when we were waiting in the depot. It is owned exclusively by the rail line. They actually have two other garden tours that run from other parts of the state and stop here. The hotel is only for the guests of the tours. They have the schedule timed so that the hotel is always operating and full, as long as the tours are full. As hard as it was to get tickets, I would guess the tours are usually full.”

“Well, I’m certainly impressed so far,” said Susan.

“I’m afraid we’re going to run out of daylight before we even get up to the hotel,” said Marjorary.

“It says here in the brochure that they have numerous well-lit nighttime activities in and around the greenhouses near the hotel,” replied Frank. “They serve breakfast beginning at 6:00 AM and the rest of the morning is all free time to explore the rest of the gardens around the hotel. Lunch is at 12 noon and then we board the train to continue the return trip.”

“I like all the little signs that have gardening quotes on them,” remarked Marjorary.

“Seen any more clues, Frank?” asked Susan.

“No, nothing that I’ve noticed.”

At 8:00 PM that night, they saw a fascinating light show from the courtyard of the hotel. The many-colored lights interwoven into the landscape extended the beauty that the plants themselves provided during the day.

“What a wonderful way to cap off the day,” said Marjorary.

“Yeah, but I’m ready to head up to our room,” said Frank.

Lobby, halls, elevators, and rooms were all adorned with gardening décor. A guest at the Live Oak Hotel becomes immersed into the plant world day and night.

A beautiful vase filled with red roses sat on the table in their room. Frank picked up the card that read, ‘Welcome 762, 993, and 455’.

“Now, this is interesting, girls,” stated Frank. “Inside this card is a smaller card. It says, ‘A pinnate leaf has many paths’... I think we’ve found another clue.”

“Sounds like it,” said Susan.

“I think it’s a treasure hunt,” said Marjorary.

“Hmm ... very possible,” replied Frank.

When morning arrived, our guests headed to the dining room for breakfast. A buffet bar held copious amounts of traditional and exotic offerings. Many of the fruit and vegetable dishes are harvested from the hotel gardens seasonally.

“What are you looking at, Frank?” asked Marjorary.

“Just observing the surroundings and guests,” answered Frank. “You never know if you’re being watched, particularly with all the mystery of these clues we’ve received. Somebody could be checking to see if we’ve found anything.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little overdramatic, Frank?” asked Susan.

“You never know ...”

“When we finish breakfast, can we explore the gardens behind the hotel?” asked Marjorary.

“Absolutely,” answered Frank. “Before we start back there, though, I want to get a picture of you ladies standing under the namesake tree out front. I believe it’s the biggest live oak I’ve ever seen.”

Returning with a fully loaded plate from the buffet counter, Frank unrolled his napkin. Expecting another note, he was not disappointed.

“Okay, I’ve got a note,” said Frank. “Do you ladies have one?”

“I didn’t get one,” replied Susan.

“Me neither,” said Marjorary. “What does your note say, Frank?”

“It says, ‘My bark is worse than my bite’.”

“An obvious thought is it has something to do with a dogwood tree,” said Susan.

“Very true,” said Frank. “But we must consider the clues as a whole, rather than individually. On with breakfast, though. I always say ...”

“A man thinks better on a full stomach,” said the ladies in unison.

Rested, refreshed, and refueled, the trio made their way out to the big live oak tree and then to the paths of the back gardens.

“Okay, girls, Live Oak Sam says to watch out for furry and not-so-furry friends who call these gardens home.”

“Where did you get that?” asked Susan.

“From that sign over there,” answered Frank.
“See, there’s a picture of Live Oak Sam.”

“Well, if I come across one of the not-so-furry friends, I’ll let you negotiate with him, Frank,” declared Marjorary.

“My negotiating skill with slithering creatures consists mostly of going the other way,” replied Frank.

“Figures,” said Susan.

“Look at that interesting Shampoo Ginger over there,” said Marjorary. “The sign says it is still used in shampoos and conditioners around the world.”

“Look, ladies,” said Frank. “Keep watching that hole in that stub branch of the live oak.”

“Oh, how cute,” said Marjorary. “Those two little squirrels popping their heads out. They’re probably wondering where dinner is.”

“I get the same way waiting for the pizza delivery guy,” stated Frank.

“We know,” said the girls in unison.

“I’m not sure how much farther these paths go, but it is getting to be around 11 o’clock,” said Frank. “We should probably start making our way back to the hotel.”

“Okay, but just one more little side path,” said Susan.

They arrived back at the hotel dining room a little before noon. The hostess, waiters, and waitresses all wore the typical gardening attire of coveralls and straw hats. The menu gave them a choice of six different meal packages and a railway special of the day.

“I think I’ll have a Rueben sandwich,” said Marjorary.

“I’m going all out with the railway special, the Engineer’s Beef Stew,” said Frank.

“Where do you see Engineer’s Beef Stew, Frank?” asked Susan.

“At the bottom of the page,” answered Frank. “That big box that says Railway Special.”

“The box on my menu says the railway special is a strawberry salad,” said Susan. “Wait ... at the bottom of the box it says, ‘Squirrels like strawberries, too’.”

When the waitress came to their table to take their order, they asked her about the railway special.

“Oh, we hand out those menus randomly as a test,” answered 241, their waitress. “But you can have either.”

“Okay, look at the red bar across the top of your menu, Susan,” said Frank. “I don’t see anybody else in the dining room with that red bar on their menu.”

“I don’t understand,” said Susan. “Do you think my menu is also a clue and if so, why are we the only ones apparently receiving it?”

“I don’t know, Susan,” answered Frank. “But it is becoming more curious.”

When they were finishing their desserts, the waitress came around and asked if they wanted refills on their coffee.

“One last round for the road?” asked 241.

“I’m good,” said Frank.

“Not for me, thank you,” answered Susan.

“I’ve had my fill, too,” replied Marjorary.

“Oh, by the way, sir,” said the waitress. “A gentleman at another table asked me to give this envelope to you.”

“What gentleman?” asked Frank.

“That man ... well, he was over there, but I don’t see him now,” she answered.

“Open it up, Frank,” demanded Marjorary.

“Okay ... it is a letter written in calligraphy. It says, ‘All things must come to an end. Beware the Pink Trumpet Vine’.”

“What does that mean?” asked Susan.

“I don’t know,” said Frank. “Marjorary, Google Pink Trumpet Vine on your phone. I don’t remember its botanical name.”

“One of the botanical names for the Pink Trumpet Vine is *Pandorea ricasoliana*,” said Marjorary. “It says they named the genus after Pandora.”

“Of course, Pandora’s Box,” said Frank. “An ominous clue, indeed. But why would a source of evil have a connection to a garden tour?”

“And why us?” asked Susan.

“This is starting to feel a little creepy to me, Frank,” said Marjorary.

“Pandora’s Box was Greek mythology,” said Frank. “Not something real. Whoever gave us this note is either warning us about something or giving us another clue to find something. I think when we get aboard the train, we should lay out all of the clues and see where they lead us. I’ve got a feeling it is something in the last garden that we visit on our way back.”

“Welcome to the Daisy car,” said the host. “If you were in the Daisy car when you arrived at the hotel, you should now go to the Camellia car.”

“That would be us,” said Frank.

“It’s two cars down, sir,” said the host.

“Once we get there and get settled in, we can lay out all the clues and see if we can see the whole picture,” said Frank. “Before we do that, though, let’s split up and see if we can learn anything from some of the other passengers.”

Half an hour later, they regrouped at their table.

“Anybody learn anything?” asked Frank. “The people I talked to didn’t know anything about any clues.”

“Nobody I talked to knew anything either,” said Susan.

“I talked to that lady I told about the clues earlier in the trip, but she said they never got anything else, so they just forgot about it,” said

Marjorary. “Do you think we just imagined they were clues and got carried away?”

“No, I don’t,” answered Frank. “Neither do I know why we have been singled out, but I say we continue on with the plan.”

“I’m in,” said Susan.

“Me, too,” said Marjorary. “Unless it gets any creepier.”

“Understood,” said Frank. “Okay, here’s what we have in the order that we received them:

- The leaf that falls the farthest is at the top of the tree.
- A name doesn’t always add up, which when we converted our name numbers to letters, we arrived at deed, deep, deem, or deer.
- The brochures that highlighted plants, including the Golden Rain Tree, Gold Mound Duranta, and Golden Shrimp Plant
- A pinnate leaf has many paths.
- My bark is worse than my bite.

- Squirrels like strawberries, too.
- All things must come to an end. Beware of the Pink Trumpet Vine. When we looked up the genus name, we found it referred to Pandora.

“Just because we received them in that order doesn’t mean we have to follow them in that order to a conclusion, does it?” asked Susan.

“No, I don’t think it does,” answered Frank.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” announced the host. “In approximately fifteen minutes we will be arriving at the next depot, where you will get off and take a short bus ride to Walker Gardens.”

“That doesn’t give us a whole lot of time to work on this,” said Frank. “We’ll have to bring the list with us and see if we come across anything that makes what we have any clearer.”

Walker Gardens had well-paved walkways that intertwined the gardens, so you were usually

within five or six feet of any planting. The entrance walk led to a large visitor center where they could begin their exploration.

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Susan. “Come over here to this sign, guys.”

“Acerola the pirate is said to have spent time in the area of Walker Gardens,” said Frank, reading the sign.

“There’s the kicker,” said Susan. “Legend has it that Acerola buried a treasure chest somewhere on the current garden property.”

“But despite all the digging and landscaping in the gardens, no one has ever found a treasure,” said Marjorary.

“So, you may be right about these clues being for a treasure hunt, Marjorary,” said Frank. “But, given what we know about everyone else on the train apparently not receiving clues, I don’t think this is a feature of the Gulf Coast Garden Railway.”

“If the treasure were gold, that would explain the clue that referenced those plants with gold or golden in their name,” said Susan.

“Yes, it would, Susan,” affirmed Frank. “So, if we still want to proceed, then we need to get started down the main path and watch for anything where the clues might fit.”

The main walkway led behind the Visitor Center, where it eventually arrived at an intersection of six different paths. Each path had a sign with the path’s name on it. The farthest one to the right was Turtle Crossing. The one next to it was Deer Trail.

“I think we must certainly take Deer Trail,” said Frank. “Do you ladies concur?”

“It has to be,” said Marjorary.

After about twenty minutes on Deer Trail, Frank noticed that the path appeared to be merging with a main walkway ahead.

“This path seems to not have any answers,” said Frank. “And we are running out of path.”

“Wait,” said Susan. “Look over there. It looks like a mulched side path.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Frank. “Let’s go down it a little.”

“Oh, look,” said Marjorary. “There’s a squirrel, and he is eating something.”

“It looks like a strawberry,” said Susan.

“Yes, it is,” exclaimed Marjorary. “And now, he’s running up into that tree with it.”

“Is that tree what I think it is, Frank?” asked Susan.

“Yes, indeed,” replied Frank. “It is a dogwood.” Studying the tree, he continued, “Watch the top of the tree.”

“The wind is blowing down a leaf from the top of the tree,” said Susan.

“Then it is all beginning to fit,” remarked Marjorary.

“Yeah, but it all almost seems too easy, too much of a coincidence, almost contrived,” said

Frank. "Now, we are down to our last clue, 'All things must come to an end. Beware of the Pink Trumpet Vine'. Does anybody see one?"

"Over there," said Susan. "It is a huge sprawling plant growing over the surrounding plants."

"Hmm," said Frank. "This would certainly seem to be the spot." Walking around the huge vine, Frank stopped dead in his tracks. "Back here, ladies."

About ten feet behind the Pink Trumpet Vine, they saw a shovel stuck in the ground.

"It appears as though we are to dig here," said Frank, drolly. "I guess I'll have a go."

After digging down about two feet, Frank's shovel hit something hard. Digging around the object, he soon discovered it to be a box of some sort. Further clearing away of the dirt revealed a rectangular, leather-covered chest.

"Could that really be Acerola's buried treasure?" asked Marjorary, excitedly.

"Can you open the lid, Frank?" asked Susan.

“I probably could, but I don’t know if I should,” he answered.

“Why?” asked the ladies in unison.

“Remember Pandora’s Box,” said Frank.

“You said that was just Greek mythology, Frank,” countered Susan.

“Yeah, but, but ...” stammered Frank. “Okay, here goes.”

“Look at all that gold coin,” exclaimed Susan.

“We’re rich,” said Marjorary. “But, of course ... it’s not ours.”

“No, it belongs to Walker Gardens,” said Frank. “I will stay here, and you ladies go get some help from the Visitor Center.”

When Susan and Marjorary came back down the path, they were accompanied by twenty people. An hour later, television crews descended on the site. It was a historical find never seen in the region before. Legend had become fact.

“Why us?” posed Susan.

“I don’t know,” said Frank. “It was all kind of strange.”

“And what about Pandora’s Box?” asked Marjorary.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” said Frank. “It could have been a Pandora’s Box in a way. What if someone else had found it who didn’t share our belief that it belonged to the gardens? What if whoever opened that box decided to keep all the gold for themselves? I think in a case like that, there might have been evil connected to the wrong possession of the treasure.”

“Why were we given seemingly easy clues to find it?” asked Susan. “I mean, somebody had to know it was there. Why didn’t they just dig it up?”

“That is a puzzle,” replied Frank. “It had to be somebody that had a connection to the pirates or, at least, had the information. There has to be some kind of moral rationale as to why, whoever they are, they didn’t dig it up themselves. Like I said before, I don’t think this had anything to do

with the railway, yet someone in the railway and/or the hotel had to get the clues specifically to us. How they could have known that we would handle it the way we did, I don't know. It almost has a supernatural air to it."

"What do you mean, Frank?" asked Marjorary.

"Who is the one person who would know for sure where the treasure lies?" posed Frank.

"Well, the pirate Acerola would certainly know, but he's been dead a couple hundred years," answered Susan.

"Exactly," said Frank. "If he had given the location to someone before he died, I can't imagine that no one would have dug it up in over two hundred years."

"Then who?" asked Marjorary.

"Perhaps ... our mystery person is ... well, perhaps it is Acerola himself behind it all," said Frank.

“Acerola’s ghost?” asked Susan. “That sounds kind of ... I know ... supernatural.”

“Perhaps,” replied Frank. “It is one possible explanation, though one that most would probably not believe. Doesn’t everything that happens in this garden have a supernatural touch to it? Botanists can explain the how’s of the science, but not the why’s of life.

“Okay,” said Susan. “What if Acerola is stuck in some kind of purgatory and his continued redemption depends on correcting the wrong of the stolen coin?”

“Perhaps,” said Frank. “We can merely speculate on that, with no witnesses. But then, perhaps ... we are not meant to know ... I think we should get back to the train before we get caught up in all the hoopla.”

“You don’t want to be in the spotlight?” asked Susan.

“I don’t take pictures well,” answered Frank. “We didn’t do anything special—just followed the clues given to us. Besides, the story of Acerola’s

treasure isn't over. Whoever gave us all those clues had to have a plan. Why they went about it in the manner they did, well ... that's still a mystery. It wouldn't be a stretch to think that plan also included how the treasure would be used ... Remember what we said about possible unleashed evil."

"So, it's still possible that Walker Gardens might not use the treasure wisely?" asked Marjory.

"Oh. I don't know anything about the people running this garden," answered Frank. "I'd like to think with everything that I've seen here they would continue with planting more beautiful plants. But ... suddenly coming into a large amount of money can make people do strange things sometimes."

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," said Susan.

"Sounds vaguely familiar, Susan," said Frank. "It most definitely fits. Hopefully, those in power will heed that advice as well."

“There remains a cloud of uncertainty, though,” said Susan. “But we’ve done all that we can do, haven’t we?”

“Yes, I believe that we have,” said Frank. “There is one thing I’m sure about. This is not the last garden to ever hold a treasure.”

“You think there is more buried treasure in other gardens?” asked Susan.

“Walk into our own gardens at home,” answered Frank. “God has put a treasure in every unopened flower.”

OBSERVING THE GRACKLES

It can be a lonely life – writing about grackles, that is. That thought came to me one day when I realized that I had begun to notice the similarities between the grackles and some of my human encounters. I’ve decided to leave those musings, though, to those who think more deeply than I do.

After suspending my bird feeding operation for a period of time until I could get the fire ants under control, I began anew in March. Not that the March timetable had any particular significance because the fire ants were still there. I kill one mound, and they move six feet over and start another one. But it came about partially by chance.

One morning I had a hankering for a popcorn breakfast. I opened the pantry door and pulled out a box of microwaveable packets from the back. I don’t know why, but I happened to check the expiration date on the box. That is something that I would never even remotely think to do, but I did (perhaps some divine influence). It expired five

years ago. Not having been previously concerned with the nutritional degrading of outdated popcorn, I decided the birds probably wouldn't care about such matters. So, I popped a bag, took it outside, and spread it around on the grass. It took about an hour for anyone to notice, but the grackles eventually came and devoured my offering. Now they sit on the fence and squawk if I haven't met the need for their 8:00 am and 5:00 pm feedings.

I soon ran out of outdated popcorn, so securing a reliable source within economic parameters for their ravenous appetite became a concern. Again, perhaps some divine influence convinced the local grocery store to always have a BOGO of some brand every week. The squawking fence-setters have developed a cosmopolitan attitude to all the brands being offered, but I have noticed a nuanced preference for the Movie Theatre Butter variety.

It usually begins with "The Scout". A big male with a twisted tail feather arrives first to survey the offering of the day, He will then converse with his fellow aviators and let them know that

dinner is served. I have noticed, though, that he eats a fair amount himself before he begins his scouting report.

Once the word is out, they begin flying in from east, west, north, and south. Sometimes they glide in solo from a hundred yards away, silently approaching like a stealth bomber. Other times, it is like an entire squadron descending in mass. Occasionally, one will come in with a mockingbird doggedly pursuing him.

When two big males arrive at the same time, they begin the ritual of male dominance. With necks thrown back and heads held high, they stretch out their wings and begin to strut their stuff. It is only after they realize that while they were dancing, the females were sneaking around and eating all the popcorn. Then it's like an afterthought, "Maybe this isn't as important as we thought it was." Back to the popcorn. More timid members of the flock then snatch a kernel and fly off with it.

There can be an eerie silence sometimes when all are eating, but when I hear a lot of squawking, I usually know what's up. Over to the side are all the young grackles with their urgent pleadings to be fed. Mother grackles then take a small fragment from a kernel and feed their young. As soon as the young grackles have swallowed those small fragments, they begin flapping their wings and squawking again saying, "More, Mom. More."

Arriving home after an early morning errand, I found twenty grackles on our roof and twenty or so on the neighbor's roof. I'm guessing they were from different clans, but everyone seemed to be in good spirits. They were all talking away, and since the language app on my smart phone didn't have grackle in its database, I had to guess what they were saying.

"When does this diner open?"

"It should be any time now. I just saw him come home."

It's been so hot lately – the heat index averaging about 105 to 110. I try to limit going outside as much as I can, but I did have to make a run to the mall for something the other day. The mall only seemed moderately busy, but there were dozens of mall walkers taking advantage of the air conditioning. What's the saying? "Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the intense midday sun."

I slipped into the pet store to buy some cat food for our spoiled feline when I came upon their bird food aisle. There were dozens and dozens of mixes and blends specially formulated to attract colorful songbirds to your garden. I did not find one bag of anything designed to attract grackles.

Heading back to my car, I took the long route which allowed me to walk in the shade most of the way. I passed by two big live oak trees that were alive with birds. They chirped in harmonious unison sending their utmost thanks heavenward to God for giving them the shade of the mighty oaks.

Fascinated, I looked up to see what kind of birds they were. For a moment I thought, “Oh, it’s only a bunch of grackles.”

A BLOOD RED ROSE

The trip across the channel infused the lungs with the fresh breath of a glittering azure sea. A hundred yards farther inland and the blue began to give way to a murky brown, but few seemed to notice. A small bump against the dock preceded the lowering of the ramp, and the masses stepped ashore. One among the crowd exiting the vessel went by the name of Professor Wilhelm Fitzmar.

The professor spent thirty-five years as a horticulturist introducing the plant world to mostly eager groups of budding gardeners and botanical science majors. Occasionally, a more challenging student would come along that had no business in a horticulture class, but the professor always gave it his best shot at conversion. Now semi-retired, Wilhelm began his quest to visit as many botanical gardens as possible before passing on to the larger garden of heaven.

As he crossed the threshold of the dock with a few slower paced passengers, the professor took

note of an individual beside him that seemed to be surveying the crowd with a more discerning eye. Beyond that, Wilhem saw nothing else notable about the man. His attire could best be described as drab. Of course, the professor himself hardly stood out among the crowd either. A chocolate brown fedora covered the man's head, and his dark jacket had a prominent bulge near his left shoulder. The stragglers soon caught up with the rest of the crowd, and the man became inconspicuous once again. Perhaps the professor would see him later.

The dully dressed educator then found himself on a busy street filled with markets and restaurants of all kinds. Intent on choosing a diner that fit his expectation of ambiance, he continued strolling past numerous humorously named eateries. The visitor then suddenly paused in front of a flight of steps leading up to Mrs. Jonger's Place of "Genuine Home Cooking", so the ornately carved wooden sign claimed. Something about the quaintness of the curtained windows and artistic handiwork of the painted rockers on the porch drew the professor's fancy. He went up the steps and into the

diner. He asked the waitress for a table in front of a curtained window and then ordered a cup of black coffee.

The lure of “Genuine Home Cooking” forced him to order two eggs over easy, four strips of thick-cut bacon, Mrs. Jonger’s special hash, toast and jelly, and a refill of black coffee.

The cheerful and ordinary-looking waitress returned with his order, and he began his conquest of Mrs. Jonger’s self-proclaimed famous cuisine. While the food was delicious, its fame seemed to be in its early stages because his fellow conquerors only numbered three at the time.

Quite satisfied with his meal, Wilhelm inquired as to how much farther he must travel to reach Botsford Gardens.

“One half mile down the road, on the right, sir,” said the waitress.

“Give my compliments to Mrs. Jonger,” said Wilhelm. “It was a most delicious breakfast.”

The waitress nodded and smiled. The professor walked down the steps and waved to the waitress. She waved back, continuing to smile. As he rounded a small bend in the cobblestone street, he belatedly sensed something odd about the waitress's smile. It could have just been her normal smile, but maybe she was hiding something more intriguing. He would later find out that Mrs. Jonger was actually Harvey Giolo from Brooklyn, New York.

As the bend in the street straightened out, the horticulturist came upon a flurry of police activity in front of an old Catholic church. Across from the church sat an old scenic cemetery, undoubtedly filled with ancient members from the ancient church. The police activity gave no indication of a coming new resident to the cemetery. No ambulances appeared on the scene. A detective sat on an ornate iron bench interviewing a forlorn priest.

It being his nature to inquire about such matters, Wilhelm came to find out that a priceless crucifix over three hundred years old had been stolen from the church. The crucifix had marvelous red

rubies covering the front of its golden frame. The professor felt that Botsford Gardens would not suffer from a belated visit.

It could have been the professor's innocent demeanor, though such an assumption held no viable proof, but he found one young policeman on the scene to be particularly talkative regarding the case.

It seemed the prime suspect in the theft had been hired as a gardener only two weeks earlier. In that two weeks of employment the suspect showed no exceptional horticultural proficiency. That fact led the police to believe that the gardening experience claimed by the man simply gave him access to the grounds and the church buildings (he also claimed to be Catholic).

The gardening ruse further intrigued Professor Fitzmar. No one restricted his movement about the burial grounds because the police felt the cemetery had no connection to the theft.

The entrance walk to the cemetery consisted of pale gray flagstone that divided a large planting

of new roses. Beyond that planting, headstones broke the plane of short-cropped grass like intermittent towers. After an hour of walking the grounds, the professor came away without any significant thought as to the crime committed or the disappearance of the groundskeeper.

As he made the final steps on the flagstone before reaching the street, he hung his head in contemplation. Then he saw it – a reddish drop on the gray stone. His eye continued up the path to see a trail of such spots. He followed them until they took a perpendicular path off the stone in the area of the newly planted roses. He lost the trail of spots once he got off the gray stone, but his keen eye did not abandon its search. Then two drops close together began the trail anew into the bed of roses. Twenty feet farther and the professor stopped for there he found a circular pattern of drops on the mulch. Overhanging the circular area of spots, a branch of a rose held a large blood red bloom. It looked as if the red rose might have dripped the pattern of blood drops from its velvety petals. The identification label on the bush gave the name as

“Beloved”, a hybrid tea rose. Wilhelm also noticed that while all the roses gave evidence of their new planting, the ground beneath the “Beloved” rose seemed more recently disturbed.

A grin came to the professor’s face. He knew. He walked back to the church and approached the young policeman he had talked to earlier.

“Officer, may I speak to the detective heading up this investigation?” asked Wilhelm.

“Sir, I know I talked with you before, but I did not get your name,” said Officer McPherson. “And what is it that you wish to talk to him about?”

“My name is Professor Wilhelm Fitzmar, and I believe I have information as to the whereabouts of the stolen crucifix.”

“Please wait right here, sir,” said the officer.

The officer went into the church and soon reappeared with another man. Another grin came to Wilhelm’s face. The other man proved to be the man he observed coming off the boat.

“Detective Mallory,” said the new man.
“Okay, Professor Fitzmar, what do you have?”

“I believe I know where the missing crucifix is located.”

“Where is that, Professor?”

“It is in the cemetery.”

“And how do you know this?” asked the detective.

“If you will follow me, I will show you,” said the horticulturist.

“Lead on, Professor.”

Pointing to each red spot on the path, Wilhelm led the two policemen to the rose where the drops originated.

“As I understand it, your main suspect is a man recently hired by the church as an experienced gardener.”

“Go on,” said Detective Mallory.

“I believe you are correct in your assumption that his claim as a gardener was merely a ploy to

get access to the church. Further evidence is the fact that the person working with these roses lacked professional wisdom. A professional gardener would have worn leather gloves to keep from being pricked by the thorns. The one who replanted this “Beloved” rose – for it has clearly been dug up and replanted – did not wear gloves. And thus, we have this trail of blood drops. I believe this replanting to be for one reason. This blood red rose sits atop your missing crucifix.”

Inspector Mallory looked at Wilhelm trying to get a read on the educator. Finally, after a long pause, he said to Officer McPherson, “Go get a couple of other guys and bring some shovels.”

The officers pulled up the “Beloved” rose, adding a few of their own drops of blood to the crime scene in the process. They started digging and hit something quickly. A little more careful digging brought up a big burlap sack. Opening the sack, they found something wrapped in more burlap and finally a linen cloth.

Yes, indeed. With the affirmation of a few drops of blood – and as the professor added, perhaps a few drops of irony – they found the golden crucifix with the beautiful red rubies wrapped within that linen cloth. Buried underneath a blood red rose named “Beloved”, it had been brought back into the light.