

WILD EYE

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Weeds in the Landscape

by Nancy Bain

You know the little garden yard sign that says, “May all your weeds be wildflowers”? I always wonder just what that means. And because I prefer a scruffy yard over a meticulous one, I’m motivated to find ways to include weeds to shape a wild landscape. For weeds are a complex part of a thriving, biodiverse ecosystem. The challenge is, of course, how to include unwelcome species such that they can be viewed as civil and respectable. It’s not for the faint of heart.

My first weedy challenge was with Enchanter’s Nightshade (*Circaea canadensis* L), a species I learned to identify when I began studying woodland wildflowers. Robert L. Henn, in *Wildflowers of Ohio* (2nd ed), wrote a description that utterly charmed me: “The genus is named after Circe, the enchantress from Greek mythology, who gave potions made from this plant to the companions of Odysseus and turned them into swine.” Now wouldn’t that be fun to point out to visitors to my yard? Although further study finds that *C. canadensis* is not a nightshade (it’s in the Evening Primrose family), and the name was given by early botanists who loved classical mythology (as I do), and the plant is never mentioned in the *Odyssey*, but who cares? The plant’s name and physiognomy invite fanciful imagination, keeping the conversation enchantingly alive.

Yes, *C. canadensis* gets straggly and brown after it flowers, but as a habitat indicator, it links me to the land’s original natural history—a setting of wooded floodplain and rich woods made up of oaks, walnuts, and maples trees. A plain plant, it supports small insects such as native bees of the Halictid and Ceratina species, syrphid flies (hover flies), and fuzzy bee flies. Enchanter’s Nightshade is also the specific host plant for the Enchanter’s Cosmet Moth whose tiny larvae act as miners, excavating artistic and fascinating patterns and splotches on the leaves. Without appreciating the values of so many weeds, we miss so much. “Mysterious and little-known organisms live within walking distance of where you sit,” writes E.O. Wilson, in *The Diversity of Life*. “Splendor awaits in minute proportions.”

Maintaining weeds makes wild landscaping a special challenge to countering conventional perspectives. So, when ecologist and native plant educator Krista De Cooke declared that landscapes “should be controlled,” I winced. Oh, I understand what she means. But the very hallmark of a weed, its resiliency and spunk, is to defy containment or being killed off. It wants

to live and has a right to defend its life with all kinds of nasty defenses. I learned this at least one time. For years I allowed *C. canadensis* volunteers to amble coyly about the respectable forbs. But (and there's always a but) there came a day when a rescue Siberian Husky, who—I must add—despised being groomed, came into my life. All it took was one of her chipmunk-chasing romps into the meadow patch to rouse me to banishing *C. canadensis* to the back woods. Enchanting? I think not. I hadn't paid enough attention to Henn's description (he forgot to add "Alert!") that the fruit is a small (very small) bur bearing numerous hooked bristles that easily attach to animal fur to further their dispersal. Yet (and with weeds there's always a yet), now that my dear Wolfie is gone, I've let the plants return. I'm drawn to the challenge of observing and identifying all the tiny insects I'd never know otherwise that fly amidst the plants. For now, anyway, *C. canadensis* has become civil and respectable enough.

I've had more success with other weeds. A favorite is Maryland Figwort (*Scrofularia marilandica* L.). The naturalist Jim McCormac hooked me on this very tall plant (up to seven feet!). It has also been highly recommended by the Xerces Society for pollinators. When I found the species growing along the creek behind my house, I took some seeds home and scattered them along my meadow border where they've since taken off. They remind me of Pigpen, in the Charlie Brown comics, with clouds of wasps and small bees and flies swirling about the heads rife with their inconspicuous and miniscule flowers. The sturdy stems give architectural height, and a sense of towering magnificence, that contrasts with the floppy plants.

Weeds I'm working with currently give me more confidence about my enterprise. There's Virginia Knotweed (*Persicaria virginiana*) that sports dramatic spikes giving wispy distinction to Cup-plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*) and fall-blooming Jerusalem Artichoke (*Helianthus tuberosus*). When grouped, the flourishing spears, adorned with small white flowers, actually glow in shaded areas. In addition, I'm cultivating a combination of the ruffled Three-seeded Mercury (*Acolypha rhomboidei* Raf) and Ground Cherry (*Physalis heterophylla*). They're growing in a very harsh habitat next to the house foundation beneath the tankless water heater vent. This year, with all the rain, the confined area is colorful with a sole volunteer Rudbeckia whose yellow blooms brighten in contrast with the mostly green weeds. The Ground Cherry is especially intriguing. As the host plant for the larvae of the Carolina Sphinx Moth (an important food source for many birds), by late summer it will spew its paper-thin bladders (similar to the fruit of the Bladdernut shrub) onto the ground forming a nutritious mulch that will provide food for hungry insects and mammals through fall and winter.

May all your weeds be wildflowers? I think that really means may all your weeds be *wild* (space) *flowers*. Each one is a flower, and each one is wild in its own way. They are respectable and civil in the wild landscape. At least, I'm working on that.