



GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR. LIBRARY
 COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION
 P. O. Box 1776
 Williamsburg, Virginia 23187

*"Soon o'er their heads
 blithe April airs shall sing
 A thousand wildflower round
 them shall unfold;
 The green buds glisten in the
 dews of spring,
 And all be vernal rapture
 as of old."*

Spring by John Keble
 English clergyman and poet

This has been a most changeable spring. We first suffered a serious drought, then some extremely hot days, followed by very cold days. As a result, we were forced to enjoy the blossoming of the tulips and the redbud trees much too quickly and for too short a time.

The blossoming of the redbud tree signals the arrival of spring in Virginia. The rosy pink and purple blossoms appear before the leaves on their branches and usually before that other spring beauty, the dogwood, begins to bloom. Being a member of the Legume or pea family, the flower of the redbud is pea-like. The redbud is a small ornamental tree that grows wild in the woods and fields and is very suitable for planting on small lawns and in residential yards where larger trees are undesirable. It tends to grow 20 to 30 feet tall and likes full sun or light shade. Not only is the redbud beautiful in spring, but the green leaves turn a lovely yellow in the fall. Redbuds are especially colorful as you ride along Rt.199 here in Williamsburg, but I fear we are going to be deprived of that pleasant sight as Rt. 199 gets widened, all in the name of progress.

There is wonderful folklore connected with the redbud tree. It is also known as the Judas tree, a name that some claim was given to it by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. That is undocumented, as is the rest of the legend. It is said that Judas Iscariot hanged himself from a tree called *Cercis siliquastrum*, which is an old world tree and is a cousin to the redbud. The blossoms, as the story goes, were originally white, but turned blood-like in color as if blushing in shame and to simulate tears of sorrow at Easter time because Judas betrayed Christ.

These folk stories are interesting and harmless. We have gotten away from such myths today, but we do have less elaborate myths of a sort. Ours are more on the order of mis-information. For example, while we were suffering the drought earlier this season, many people mentioned that a benefit of less rain would result in fewer mosquitoes this summer. Unfortunately, that is untrue. Drought does not necessarily prevent mosquitoes from becoming a problem due to the fact that the mosquito eggs have a double thickness of coating and that coating enables the eggs to survive two years before hatching. They simply remain dormant and eventually can and do hatch. So there is no guarantee that we will have fewer mosquitoes around this summer. Just as the settlers were plagued by the pesky mosquitoes at Jamestown in the 17th century, we will probably have to deal with them again here in Virginia, as always.

They were a problem for the 18th-century Virginians, as Landon Carter mentions throughout his diary. In September of 1764 he wrote, "Vile musketoos, which have during the prodigious heat been almost as plenty as bees in a hive; in short all our care could hardly keep them out of our rooms in the night which with the heat prevented all sleeping, at least very little of it was enjoyed." On another occasion in June of 1773 he again mentions the abundance of mosquitoes and in order to keep his slaves from complaining too much about them and from being "idle" he wrote, "I venture out and fight my way with bushes."

On one occasion he describes the bug as being "a very small narrow fly that lies quite close to the skin and smarts black and slender."

As bad as they seem to have been here in Virginia, the swamps of southern New Jersey were so badly plagued by the pests in early times that some believe the Swedes, who were trying to settle there, were driven away by them.

Peter Kalm in his travels in North America wrote of them, "The gnats which are very troublesome at night here, are called mosquitoes...In daytime or at night they come into the houses, and when the people have gone to bed they begin their disagreeable humming approach nearer and nearer to the bed, and at last suck up so much blood that they can hardly fly away...After a rain, they gather frequently in such quantities about homes that their numbers are legion...On sultry evenings they accompany the cattle in great swarms from the woods to the houses or to town, and when they are driven before the houses...[they] fly in wherever they can. In the greatest heat of summer they are so numerous in some places that the air seems to be full of them, especially near swamps and stagnant waters...When they stung me here at night, my face was so disfigured by little red spots and blisters that I was almost ashamed to show myself."

Of course, not only did the pests cause discomfort, but also disease such as malaria, which means bad air, referred to as the ague. It wasn't until much later, in the 1880s, that window screens were introduced.

Today we in Virginia, as well as our neighbors in New Jersey, have effective mosquito control systems in place in our communities. In fact, it was in New Jersey that the first efforts were made to create an organization called the New Jersey Mosquito Extermination Association which over time became known as the New Jersey Mosquito Control Association. They led the way in research and development in this area.

I know of no really successful remedy or repellent for mosquitoes, but I do have a suggestion for another pest which I find equally annoying, the May fly. To keep away May flies try wearing those little sheets called "Bounce" that you add to your clothes in the dryer as a fabric softener. They seem to repel the May fly.

It is wise to remember that those of us that are bitten by the gardening bug are often bitten by bugs while gardening.

Janet Guthrie