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GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

"Rain, Rain, go away"

We have been experiencing an unusual amount of rain this season and a dry spell would be welcome relief. Our weather is quite opposite what they were experiencing in Virginia in June 1774. Philip Fithian wrote in his journal on June 11, 1774, "It is alarming to observe how hard & dusty in the country is; towards evening some clouds arose & looked Promising in the West, but they bring no rain – No rain has fell here since the 24th of May, & then but a Scanty Shower, & most of the time since Windy."

The Catalpa blossoms have come and gone already, which for us in Williamsburg signals Memorial Day.

Memorial Day has been celebrated in our country since 1865, when it was established in Waterloo, New York, to honor our civilian dead. On May 5, 1866, it was first observed by decorating the graves of Civil War soldiers. It was appropriately called Decoration Day at that time and over time the name was changed to Memorial Day.

I remember Memorial Day in my childhood with vivid, fond memories. In the small town where I grew up the residents turned out to participate in or follow the parade through the streets. The paraders were members of the police and fire departments, the local scout troops, and civic clubs. It was a big honor to be a part of the parade and I felt very proud to have carried the American flag one year as a Brownie Scout. We all gathered in Memorial Park where the ceremonies took place. After the salute to the flag and the singing of the national anthem, the town officials said prayers and made many speeches. Then each year the very same special poem was read. It was spoken very slowly and in such a solemn and serious manner that I knew it was very important. I learned the first verse by heart, almost like a prayer, even though I really did not know what it was all about. It went,

"In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below."

The next two verses go on,

"We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Fields

Take up our quarrel with the foe;
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields.”

It was not until I grew older that I even knew where Flanders Fields was or what that poem was telling us. The story behind it is quite interesting.

“In Flanders Fields” was written by a Canadian doctor, Lt. Col. John McCrae, in May 1915, before the United States entered WWI. There had been four years of bloody battles raged on the fields of Flanders in western Belgium. Ten million soldiers had been killed and twenty million were wounded. Due to the great number of war deaths, this war is still known as The Great War. Before that war those fields yielded few poppies; however, after the war the space where all the bloody battles had taken place were alive with bright red poppies. The soil had become so enriched with lime due to the rubble left from the war that the poppies thrived. The display of the scarlet poppies blowing in the wind along with the white burial crosses on the fields inspired Dr. McCrae to write his poem there on the site of the transformed battlefields.

The red poppy, one of the most popular wildflowers, became an international symbol of peace and patriotism. It serves as a symbol in Canada and France, as well as America. It reminds all of the red blood from those soldiers who died in battle for freedom.

This poppy is not the opium poppy, nor is the specie known as the Oriental poppy, which grows large flowers. It is the small red poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) and is native to Eurasia and North Africa. It can be quite an invasive plant, but is so attractive that most do not mind its invasiveness. It is an easy to grow annual. Some call it the Shirley poppy, which refers to the village of Shirley in England where an English vicar conducted a study of these poppies and popularized them. It is also called the Buddy poppy. This name refers to the artificial poppy, which is sold prior to Memorial Day by the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The sale of these replicas benefits disabled and needy veterans. This is a plan that was adopted at the VFW encampment in 1923 at Norfolk, Virginia, and today when you purchase one of those little red poppies, you can rest assured that you are aiding the veterans who have assembled the symbols of peace.

This same little flower was grown by George Washington at Mt. Vernon and by Thomas Jefferson at Monticello in the 18th century.

Janet Guthrie