

HFG Wraps Up Season

Despite a dry June, Mother Nature smiled once again on High Falls Gardens and provided a bounty of flowers, fruits and seeds among over 120 plant species at the Hillview Farm field this season.

As the project is still in a research and development phase, the harvest consists of the observations, samples, photos and seeds that will go toward confirming identification of the species and stabilization of the plant populations for future study.

The most remarkable result this year was that, of the hundreds of plants carried up from the Ancram field on that plant-perfect, cool and rainy May 17th [see Spring '97 issue], every single one survived, and several sailed right through without dropping a leaf.

The double mulch -- hardwood chips layered over black plastic sheeting as a means of keeping back the hay meadow grasses -- was a great success. Although the quackgrass speared right up through both layers of mulch, the eruptions were sporadic and easily controlled by hand weeding. In the aisles between the sixteen 150-foot-long, four-foot-wide beds, the Dutch white clover edged out the annual ryegrass and took off to the point of invasiveness, as was forecast.

As the summer progressed, the toads, frogs, snakes, bees, spiders, ladybugs and earthworms galore moved right in and made themselves at home. Japanese beetles hit a few leaves, but not in force. The rabbits and groundhogs seemed to be preoccupied elsewhere. The deer barricade, consisting of peanut butter smeared on scraps of aluminum foil pie-plate attached to the single-strand, battery-powered electric fence, appears to hold as long as the switch is on and the bait regularly replenished.

On Sunday, September 7th a sunny Open Garden Day attracted several of the HFG members who came to check out these exotics they'd been reading about. Harry Campbell came all the way from Syracuse and introduced himself as a fellow plant nut and Robert Newman Collection beneficiary (see page 3).

Right now it's a horserace between the frosts and the late-bloomers, including the *Atractylodes macrocephala* from Beijing and the *Coix lachryma-jobi* var. ma-yuen from the Nippon Shinyaku Institute for Botanical Research. ■

Newman in Nanjing, Sends E-Mail

Our *Extraordinary Collector* and favorite man-about-China, Robert Newman, arrived in Nanjing this past July to start his new position as curator of the Medicinal Herb Garden at the Institute of Botany.

His journey was not without hazards and a rocky initiation period. The usual traveler's queasiness was magnified in Hong Kong, where Robert happened to glance at an article that appeared in Sichuan Airlines magazine. To his horror, the article extolled the deliciousness of dog meat, included recipes, and quoted a gourmand who claimed to salivate whenever a fluffy yellow puppy wandered into view. Beyond such typical shocks, Robert then had to endure a strange new kind of cultural whiplash when his board charges at the Institute were raised because he had the temerity to request food without deep fat frying, heavy spices or MSG.

The next test of courage was a period of screaming frustration directed at Microsoft (@#\$\$&*Bill Gates!!) as he set up his computer and tried to log on to the Internet. Some experiences are truly universal! However, the computer service people in Nanjing were extremely helpful to him in this regard, he reported.

Finally both fed and connected, he was able to turn his attention to the Garden. Alas, the landscape department had been in charge ever since the last curator retired. (No young people in China want to do garden/farm work, they're all after those white-collar jobs.) The plants were alive but some were looking a bit shaky and the soil was in poor shape. The irrigation system was broken. Weeds were in evidence, although this was a good sign that at least no one had nuked the plants and soil with chemicals.

After some intense e-mailing back and forth to his consultants, Robert decided that composting is the solution and was persuaded to go straight for the big time -- biodynamic compost using preparations supplied by the Josephine Porter Institute in Woolwine, Virginia. HFG will sponsor Robert for JPI's Associative Contract, under which JPI supports the grower for an annual fee. Now Robert's lining up a manure source and mulch material. ■

For a description of biodynamic composting, see page 4.

ANSWERING THE CALL: Growers Network Forms

In the past several years that Robert Newman, ace networker, has been building and then dispersing his collection of Asian medicinal plants, a strange phenomenon has occurred.

A few people, some in ordinary walks of life but none formally trained in botany or horticulture, have dropped what they'd been doing and have answered the call to *Grow These Plants*, each responding in his or her unique way. The mystery is, they first answered the call and then, in a reverse ripple effect, were drawn to Robert Newman.

Right now these people are finding each other and comparing notes, and a growers network is being organized. The differences as well as similarities among them are striking. Here are profiles of four of the six known to HFG who are pioneering the cultivation of Robert's seeds. (The others are Cynthia Beal and Cindy Riviere; see the new HFG Growers Resource Guide.)

● Joe Hollis

Joe's father was a professor and his mother a librarian who kept a little rock garden on the side. (This helps explain his remarkable talents.) He grew up in Detroit and went to college at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, where he studied history and, later, anthropology. Interested in Chinese, he studied the language for a year. Then he served three years in the Peace Corps in Malaysia and Borneo. The history, genealogy, migration, anthropology of the people fascinated him; he admired their pre-industrial self-sufficiency. But then he realized that he didn't want to study it, he wanted to do it.

After the Peace Corps Joe went back to Detroit, joined a commune there, and did a big garden for them. Later he went down to Penland, the arts and crafts mecca located in western North Carolina, with some of the commune people. And there he found the permaculture movement, in its early years, as well as the mountainside hollow near the base of Mount Mitchell that would become the magical aerie called Mountain Gardens.

To create Mountain Gardens, he spent four to six weeks every winter for a few years holed up in the library at UNC. He read dozens of books, filling the margins of his copy of Hortus Third with cross-references to several other texts, just to figure out what plants to grow. As a permaculturist, he of course preferred multiple-use plants (food/medicine/fiber). Then he got into Chinese herbs.

Joe now lives and works in his fantastic garden where some of the plants he established are over twenty years old. He's a real working herbalist and fills prescription orders for practitioners of Chinese medicine, using both (imported) dried herbs and tinctures he makes himself.

Joe reads a lot of the Taoists, and considers himself an anarchist although the political end doesn't appeal to him. He cites as prime influences the books *Gardens of Revelation: Environments by Visionary Artists* by John Beardsley (Abbeville Press Publications, NY/London/Paris 1995), *Plants, Man & Life* by Edgar Henderson, and *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization*, by Stanley Diamond.

Joe is now well-known and published in the permaculture movement. The following comment from his essay "Paradise Gardening," is especially provocative.

Ecology teaches that a pioneer (disturbed) environment favors life forms that are fast-growing but short-lived, wide-spreading, greedy -- designed to capture the maximum of sunlight and unoccupied soil. But eventually they are succeeded by the trees which, because they invest energy in making wood, grow more slowly at first but are more stable, longer-lived and finally faster-growing, more influential, the dominant species towering above.

We have spread ourselves over the earth, and used or burned just about everything that's easy to get. The age of the greedy ones draws to a close (they don't know it yet). At last, we may hope, the competitive advantage passes to the practitioners of permanence, rootedness, slow growth and steady accumulation, the vertical expansion of the human spirit into realms uncharted or long forgotten. A tree derives its satisfaction from the view achieved.

● Lavinia "Vinnie" McKinney

Vinnie was one of those who went back to the land in the early 'seventies. (Unlike others, she had the right background -- her father had a farm in Texas and they counted some well-known viticulturalists among their relatives.) In 1973 they bought a working cattle operation on a 100-acre, marginal old farm in southern Missouri, and went organic right away.

Learning from *Acres USA* and Rosina Arndt, an Anthroposophist who lived in the area, they advanced to the Pfeiffer compost preparations and other biodynamic practices. Pasture management was their big task, and restoring the worn-out, sandy soils was the key. They harvested native grasses and weeds, because at first the clovers and alfalfa wouldn't grow.

In 1980 Vinnie met Steven Foster and they began to talk about the Ozark Beneficial Plant Project. Looking for models, they traveled to herb farms up and down the West coast. But Vinnie, now with a farmer's conservatism, decided to go slow. She let go of the cattle in 1983, gave the land over to hay production, and went off-farm for income. For three years she worked as the executive director of the Threshold Foundation, which

funds innovative projects in areas of peace, social justice, and planetary issues.

In 1986 the Farm produced a successful commercial operation -- garlic -- and they were encouraged by that experience to go ahead with growing perennials. In 1989 Foster turned over his small seed company, at that point little more than a mailing list, to Vinnie and she started propagating from scratch. (Steven's still connected to the project and returns to Elixir Farm several times a year.) The first time Vinnie sent out a seed list, Robert Newman appeared, seeking *Astragalus* and all kinds of exotic things. He had already started on his collection by 1990.

Vinnie's foundation work had gotten her connected with several nonprofits, including a group doing consulting to organizations using Five Element Theory as a theoretical framework for organizational dynamics. This was the Merriam Hill Center of Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose then-director, Peter Callaway, is now a resident at Elixir Farm. Discovering that there was something in Five Element that she was after, Vinnie pursued it by studying acupuncture with J.R. Worsley in England and Florida for three years.

She practiced acupuncture in Arkansas for a brief period, but then duties at the Farm began to consume her time and she turned her attention to the plants. Worsley didn't address herbalism but, as Vinnie says, Five Element teaches excellent observation skills and she was able to proceed with an open mind and apply the theoretical framework to her botanical studies.

Elixir Farm has now, with the startling creativity in evidence among the sustainable small-scale farm operations in America, developed several streams of income. Comprising a 250-acre land trust, a botanical garden of Chinese and native plants, a watershed project and a limited liability corporation with fifteen investors, Elixir is part of a global network. In Vinnie's words:

Our intention is a stable community with an agricultural base providing seeds for medicinal plants, nutritious food crops and those rare and endangered species whose habitats are threatened....Hopefully each bioregion will have nodes, centers for biodiversity, that are secure. Security [means] that the land itself is legally dedicated or entrusted and that there is an established intent for sustaining the ecosystem with its indigenous botanical diversity.

Vinnie cites as major influences the work of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, philosopher/mystics concerned with the evolution of human consciousness. Attracted to Buddhist and Taoist principles, she aligns her concept of inner pilgrimage with harsh outer realities in words that serve as good advice to everyone working with the plants.

How do we stay on the path? With a strong vision, a good plan, committed players, and resources from those who understand the value of this work, we are able to be in the moment, be receptive and be aware.

● Harry Campbell

As an impressionable young man, Harry Campbell read a book called *Herbs the Magic Healers* by Paul Twitchell, who was associated with a mystical path called Eckankar. Harry, then as now, was drawn to mysteries in nature and history, mysticism, astrology, parapsychology and the like, but one particular detail of this book lodged itself in his mind. There was a description of a plant called Fo-ti, said to have mysterious properties, which past masters had used to lengthen their lives in order to embrace more spiritual experiences.

Over twenty years later, still in his home town of Auburn, New York, near Syracuse, Harry had a thriving business doing telephone wiring for companies like AT&T and NYNEX (which many would consider *very* mysterious) -- plus a persistent fascination with mysticism past and present. Everything from Madame Blavatsky to Robert Monroe and Len Buchanan (out-of-body travel and remote viewing) comes within his purview; *The Celestine Prophecy* is old hat to Harry. But about six years ago, in a sudden epiphany, he quit drinking and got health conscious. He remembered that plant called Fo-ti, and found a grail quest.

Harry has no background in horticulture, other than when he was a kid and his mom made him plant roses and he hated it. But he started phoning every exotic plant nursery in the country, talked to acupuncturists, herbalists, scientists at Cornell who said they once had a specimen of *Polygonum multiflorum* (the correct botanical name, as Harry had learned with difficulty) but not now.

He even connected with Dr. Hu, the ginseng expert at Harvard [mentioned in *Herbal Emissaries*, see HFG Growers Resource Guide]. She told him the legend of He Shou Wu, the "black-haired sick person named Wu," whom the villagers gave up for dead but instead he got rid of that gray, regained his youthful appearance, went on to father children and lived to age 130. Dr. Hu told Harry that she'd love to help him find the plant, but was having enough trouble working forty hours a week at her age (over eighty) and wasn't up to doing any overtime.

Finally, Harry got some good news by calling Vinnie at Elixir Farm. She actually had a *Polygonum multiflorum*, and the source was Robert Newman. Harry contacted Robert, who sent him three specimens. Instantly, Harry bonded with the Fo-ti, the painful memories of Mom's roses were transformed, and he went straight ahead to propagation by root and stem cuttings. This was about five years ago.

Today there are ten to twelve thousand Fo-ti plants growing in Harry Campbell's backyard. The oldest has been in the ground about three years and the tubers are as big as thumbs, but the plants haven't flowered or seeded yet. Whether they'll like conditions in upstate New York enough to do so has yet to be determined.