

## July Miscellany

This is the month when it is easier to read about what needs doing in the garden than to go out there and do it. The list of chores that await a cool day grows while too few are crossed out. If you are so fortunate as to have a few days vacation this month, that is an opportunity to catch up on the reading that is on the 'to-do' list. We probably read a lot more than we think we do if we have a computer since time has a way of evaporating while we follow a search that behaves like Stephen Leacock's horse, galloping off in several directions.

I have never understood the concept of 'summer' or 'beach' reading, a recommendation for something slight and insignificant. I would read the comics even if they didn't share the page with the puzzles, but to share precious time with reading material, on or off vacation, it should be something encouraging. Both books and magazines offer quantities of factual information that counteract the explosion of fear and loathing that inhabits cyberspace.

Whatever has happened to our vaunted American ingenuity? Nothing actually: it is just that the thousands of small success stories cannot be heard amid the din of those noisy voices declaring that we must continue our destructive practices because we can't change, won't change, can't afford the investment—a litany of excuses that maintain the profitable-for-a-few status quo.

One small innovation is the use of whey, the byproduct of cheese making, in the manufacture of high-grade wood finishes as substitutes for oil-based paints. It may seem a very small step, but hopeful if you consider the amount of cheese we eat. Another new thing is a parabolic solar power system that is five times more efficient than flat photovoltaic panels. That is a small change with a large difference.

Also in the design stage is a system whereby power is generated by wave action in the ocean. Meantime we ignore the good news and continue to justify our bad practices as economically essential. We continue to blow off mountain tops poisoning streams and wells that people depend upon and we continue to focus on oil, disregarding the dangerous lengths, or depths, we must go to find it. Our wants have become our needs and we have ever-growing wants. Do you think it may be time to reexamine our needs in the perspective of a new reality?

Does it seem to you that there should be an interface where economics meets morality? Do we continue to promote unrestrained growth despite the damage to the environment, damage to children's health, and even damage to our country's long-term economic health? One such example is the development of the Athabasca tar sands in Alberta, Canada. Because it is in Canada, it may not be our concern, but because the site is a top supplier of US oil imports, perhaps it is?

Oil sands are good for the economy, good for jobs. However, not only 1600 birds died in a tailings pond but deaths of young people in their 30s and 40s have been linked to the oil sands. No one disputes that the process results in damage to air, water, and the boreal forest. Oil sands extraction is a complex operation and the site in Alberta is the largest oil deposit outside of Saudi Arabia according to a 2009 National geographic article.

Our cheap energy would hardly be cheap if the real costs in environmental damage and climate change were a part of the equation. If we could bring ourselves to admit those costs, alternative sources of energy would not only be more competitive but would provide tremendous job opportunities once the initial investments were made. The potential is there. One important factor is efficiency. Technologies already exist in the US that would recover energy from waste heat, manure, food industry waste, and landfill gas. In Germany, for example, 6000 dwellings units have been built that use a mere 10% of the usual amount of energy used in standard German homes.

It is not that we can't afford to change: the long-term reality is that we can't afford not to...and the sooner the better.