

Gardening? Let's Just Talk!

As you know well, there are some days when it is much easier to talk gardening than to brave the heat and DO gardening! As stories go, we gardeners have heard about 'Chinese' Wilson who spent grueling months trekking through China to bring back to England the rare and beautiful. Starting in 1899, E.H. Wilson collected for an English firm but after 1907 he collected for Harvard's Arnold Arboretum, which had been founded in 1872 to enhance the study of horticulture in our country.

We know, too, about Gloucester's own John Clayton (1693-1773) who accompanied his father to his colonial post, found the flora of Virginia so special that quantities of his specimens were treasured in England where his reputation as a botanist is still revered. However, we may not have heard of David Landreth who left England in 1780 to establish a seed business. He tried Montreal but decided his business required a climate with a longer growing season and moved to Philadelphia in 1784. It was wise choice to move to a place in the fledgling United States with growth potential. If there was any 'bustle' to business in was in that area with its need for food.

The Landreth seed company, the fifth oldest company in the US, still exists under the same name and still publishes a wholesale catalog resembling their first efforts, a "priced list...for gratuitous distribution". Among the earliest customers were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte. David Landreth introduced the zinnia in 1798 and in 1811 the first truly white potato in contrast to the earlier ones that were yellow. How curious it is that two centuries later we are prizing Yukon Gold for its non-white color?

After his son joined the business, father and son were instrumental in establishing the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society in 1828, the oldest and probably the most prestigious horticultural society in the US. When Commodore Perry sailed in 1852 to 'open' Japan, he took thousands of pounds of Landreth's American vegetable seeds with him and when he returned he brought back the first Japanese shrubs imported into our country. A generation later seeds accompanied an ill-fated expedition to the North Pole: sixteen frigid years later 50% of the radish seeds were still viable.

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We honor Gloucester native, Dr. Walter Reed, and his research that resulted in identifying the mosquito as the vector in Yellow Fever, an illness so virulent it defeated many tropical endeavors such as the French attempt to build a canal across Panama. However diseases don't stay conquered. Malaria, for example survives just as mosquito larvae find a home in the smallest stagnant puddle. Malaria has survived centuries but even if it may never be conquered, it is increasingly being controlled. Fewer people are catching it and more effective treatments are offered.

Some of the preventive methods are as simple as keeping standing water stirred up and sleeping under netting without holes. More controversial is the spraying of DDT, which has been re-allowed as malaria deaths increased in some areas. Mosquitoes vary and the African mosquito prefers to bite people, increasing the risk of malaria. The mosquitoes in Asia, although just as plentiful, are not so fussy, being willing to bite animals as well.

One curious method of control relies on a fish, the mosquito fish *Gambusia* sp., which eats its own weight in mosquito larvae daily. Actually mosquitoes are pretty local living and dying near where they hatch so the control is also a local problem. By policing your own property you can keep them under control. Mathews County has an effective mosquito control policy including education, monitoring, and preparedness. One educational item: only the female bites (in preparation for her egg-laying chore). And with female determination a few spoonfuls of water in an abandoned paper cup will do!

Low-toxicity bio-pesticides are advised such as Bti (*Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis*) a selective killer only of mosquito larvae. Ponds or pools that can't be drained, can be treated by using those donut-shaped 'dunks', floating tablets that release Bti slowly. If your property is fronted by a ditch that often holds stagnant water, you might like to toss in a 'dunk' or two.

As the climate slowly changes, insects and diseases are shifting as well so it is important to prevent insect bites as much as possible. Using an insect repellent is helpful but the directions should be read first. More is not always better. As for illness, we are much more likely to be harmed by driving our cars than by being bitten by mosquitoes.