

WEEKLY UPDATE – MAY 1 – MAY 7

“Long stormy springtime, wet contentious April, winter chilling the lap
of very May; but at length the season of summer does come.”

Thomas Carlyle

Celebrating the Rain

Since we have had so much rain, a newly published book about this familiar feature of our coastal environment might be of interest to you, especially for readers who would enjoy a book that merges “rain and art and science to capture a gestalt.”

It is entitled *Rain: A Natural and Cultural History* by Cynthia Barnett.

She quotes from many well-known writers, ancient and more contemporary, including Aristotle, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain and Isak Dinesen. Although not technically a science book, some science is evident as she also references Robert Fitzroy, a weather forecaster as well as captain of the *Beagle*, the ship that carried Charles Darwin on his famous expeditions.

For the full review, please refer to the *NYC Times* “Book Review” section for Sunday, April 19, 2015.

The May Flower

“Sweetest of the flowers a-blooming
In the fragrant vernal days
Is the Lily of the Valley
With its soft retiring ways...”

Paul Laurence Dunbar, 1905

May’s flower is the sweetly scented **lily of the valley** (*Convallaria majalis*), the “white choral bells” of the familiar English folksong. It represents humility, chastity and sweetness. In the language of flowers so popular during the Victorian era, it conveyed the romantic message “You have made my life complete” and signifies a return to happiness.

Although all parts of the plant are extremely poisonous, it has been used as a folk remedy in the past and currently has a restricted use as an herbal remedy. It contains 38 different cardiac glycosides which increase the force with which the heart contracts and the volume of blood it can pump.

Lily of the valley is well known in Christian tradition where it is said that the plant formed from Mary's tears as she wept at the Crucifixion of Christ, thus its alternate names, Our Lady's Tears or Mary's Tears.

It is the national flower of Finland and was the floral emblem of the former Yugoslavia.

It is very popular as a wedding flower and was featured in the bridal bouquets of Princess Grace Kelly and Kate Middleton.

It has earned the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit.

A good friend who lives in the south of France just informed me that it is a tradition to offer a sprig of lily of the valley on May 1 as a good luck charm to bring good health and happiness.

Plant Highlight - Solomon's Seal

If you've been walking in the Eastern North America section of VanDusen Garden, you've noticed the prolific presence of Solomon's Seal (*Polygonatum*) which comes from the same family, Asparagaceae, as lily of the valley.

Polygonatum means "many knees" and refers to the plant's multiple jointed rhizomes. How did Solomon's Seal get its name? One explanation is that the plant's roots have depressions resembling royal seals, while another is that the roots resemble Hebrew characters.

Many species of *Polygonatum* have been used as food in China, and some have been used in traditional medicine for the treatment of pain, fever, inflammation, allergy and weakness.

It has been proven to be effective in the treatment of diabetes for nutritional hyperglycemia. In Ayurvedic medicine *P. Verticillatum* is used as an aphrodisiac. In general, it is believed to restore mental vitality, especially when the mind is overworked, overstressed or in a state of exhaustion.

"Horticulturally, the month of May is Opening Night, Homecoming and Graduation Day, all rolled into one."

Tam Mossman