Garden and Forest: The Botanical Basis of It All

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On February 29, 1888, the weekly periodical Garden and Forest, A Journal of Horticulture, Landscape Art and Forestry, was inaugurated. Rather oddly, the statement outlining the purpose of the new publication, along with an extensive list of future contributors, was relegated to a page in the advertising section that preceded the main text. It was evident, however, that the journal had been inspired by similar publications in England, including the long-running Journal of Horticulture, Cottage Gardener, and Country Gentleman’s Companion. In particular, its format and content mirrored in many respects that of The Gardener’s Chronicle, which had begun publication in 1841.

Somewhat oddly, the first article to appear in Garden and Forest was an obituary. Asa Gray, the preeminent Harvard botanist, had died a month earlier on January 30. The obituary summarized briefly the long and extremely distinguished career that had earned for Gray (and for American botany along with him) the respect of the international scientific community. American botany was no longer the exclusive domain of Europeans; American scientists, under Gray’s leadership, had established their own scientific traditions. It was through his studies of the American flora, particularly his comparisons of Japanese plants to their close relatives in North America, that Gray had achieved international recognition. These observations, demonstrating the close similarity between the floras of eastern North America and eastern Asia, had lent credibility to his defense of Darwin’s writings and played a crucial role in the development of botany and of its sub-discipline, phytogeography.

But it should not surprise us that Charles Sprague Sargent began the first issue of Garden and Forest with a glowing tribute to Asa Gray for Sargent had been Gray’s protégé, and it was thanks to him that Sargent had been asked to prepare the Report of the Forests of North America (Exclusive of Mexico) for the Tenth Census of the United States (1880)—an important stepping stone in his career. Equally important, Gray had nominated and campaigned for Sargent to be named the founding director of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University and, simultaneously, the director of the Harvard Botanic Garden, positions Sargent had accepted in 1872. As a consequence of these positions and of his natural talents and interests, Sargent had become an accomplished botanist and administrator and had established strong relationships with botanists worldwide; and following in Gray’s footsteps, he would add significantly to botanical scholarship during his fifty-five year tenure at the Arnold Arboretum. Sargent had discussed with Gray his intention to found Garden and Forest and had looked forward to his mentor’s continuing advice and his contributions to the periodical.

It was clearly obvious that Garden and Forest was to be a botanical publication: a cursory glance at the indices published for each volume shows the dominance of plant names (in botanical Latin form). Sargent realized that it was a knowledge of botany that was to inform the development of all the other disciplines he intended the journal to foster: horticulture, landscape art, and forestry. In the first issue Max Leichtlin, a German botanist and horticulturist, wrote about “New Plants from Afghanistan,” and George L. Goodale, first director of Harvard’s Botanical Museum, reviewed a key to the forest trees of Kansas and the latest edition of Asa Gray’s Elements of Botany. Other contributors included the noted field botanist Cyrus Guernsey Pringle and William Trelease, first director of the Missouri Botanical Garden, who co-authored a column entitled “Plant Notes.” In the April 4 issue of the same year an editorial entitled “The Study of Botany by
Shortia galacifolia (Oconee bells), drawn by C. E. Faxon. In the first volume of Garden and Forest, C. S. Sargent wrote that “of all the plants studied and described and classified by Asa Gray, this little herb most excited his interest.” Sargent’s story of the loss and rediscovery of the plant appears in volume 1, pages 506–507.

Horticulturists stressed the importance of a strong basis in botanical knowledge for any horticulturist; Asa Gray’s successor at the herbarium in Cambridge, Sereno Watson, contributed a column entitled “New or Little Known Plants: Rosa minutifolia;” and William G. Farlow, another of Gray’s appointees at Harvard, wrote on nitrogen fixation by plants in his article, “Tubercles on Leguminous Roots.”

Each issue also provided references to the current botanical and horticultural literature in a section on “Recent Plant Portraits.” In the May 2, 1888, number, another regular column made its first appearance: “Notes from the Arnold Arboretum.” This feature was of special importance to Sargent, and the first contribution was authored by his assistant at the Arboretum, John George Jack. Over the succeeding ten years this column would document the development of the Arboretum, focusing particularly on the many new plants discovered by the Arboretum’s agents, many of which were introduced into cultivation by the Arboretum.

One of the most significant series of botanical articles to appear in Garden and Forest resulted from Sargent’s 1892 sojourn in Japan, which inaugurated the Arnold Arboretum’s mission to explore the floras of eastern Asia. Entitled “Notes on the Forest Flora of Japan,” this series first appeared on January 18, 1893, and concluded in the December 27 issue of the same year. In 1894, the publishing firm of Houghton, Mifflin and Company collected these articles in one volume entitled Forest Flora of Japan, one of Sargent’s most enduring publications, and of special interest as the first treatise in English on the then little-known trees of Japan. In these essays Sargent built on the pioneering work of his mentor Asa Gray by elaborating on the close relationships of the floras of eastern Asia and eastern North America.

Closer to home, the pages of Garden and Forest provided news about botanical discoveries and advances in North America. New genera and species were described in its pages, such as the malvaceous genus Robinsonella, initially with two species (R. cordata and R. divergens) from Mexico, and articles on regional floras were commonplace. Among the latter were Carl Purdy’s “The Flora of the California Coast Range,” which appeared in three parts between May and June of 1896, and E. N. Plank’s extensive “Botanical Notes from Texas,” which appeared in twenty-five segments between January 1893 and May of 1895.

Specific plant groups were also featured in articles that recounted the taxon’s discovery and naming, its native habitat, range, and ecology, as well as its usefulness in cultivation. Sargent’s “Notes on Cultivated Conifers,” appeared in thirteen issues of volume ten; Michael S. Bebb contributed a five-part series entitled “Notes on Some Arborescent Willows of North America” between September and
NEW OR LITTLE KNOWN PLANTS.

Rosa minutifolia.

Our wild Roses have an ill reputation among botanists for the uncertainty which often attends the determination of their species. But there are some, fortunately, about which there can be no doubt, and we have given the figure of one which carries its distinctive characteristics obtrusively to the front and cannot be mistaken. Not only is there no other American Rose like it, but it stands alone in the genus. It has been found only on the peninsula of Lower California, near All Saints (Todos Santos) Bay, about 40 miles south of San Diego, where it was discovered in 1882, forming low, dense thickets upon the dry hillsides bordering the shore. Evidently the flower in its wild state cannot be commended as well suited to the florist’s needs, but from its habit of growth the plant may well prove a decided ornament to the lawn and garden in our more southern States, where it would doubtless be hardy.

Garden and Forest 2 (1888): 103. Engraving by C. E. Faxon

Androgy nous Flower-clusters,” which ran in June of 1895. In fact, the scope of the articles that were published in Garden and Forest spanned the entire corpus of botanical science as it was known in the late nineteenth century. Taken together this literature comprises a remarkable trove of information that is not found elsewhere in botanical literature and that in many ways remains relevant even today, as well as of great historical value.

On December 29, 1897, the five hundred and fourteenth issue of Garden and Forest included an announcement that it was to be the magazine’s last. This last issue brought the total number of pages published during Garden and Forest’s ten-year life to an impressive five thousand six hundred and sixty-eight! The reason for termination was financial: “This experiment... has shown conclusively that there are not persons enough in the United States interested in the subjects which have been presented in the columns of Garden and Forest to make a journal of its class and character self-supporting.” This was a sorry commentary on the dearth of interest among the wider American population in issues concerning botany, forestry, conservation, and landscape design.

Since the demise of Garden and Forest, no attempt has been made to re-institute the kind of interdisciplinary dialogue it had provided for a brief ten years. The several professional disciplines it addressed have evolved and diverged, becoming more and more distinct and isolated from one another. Even today a journal similar to Garden and Forest might face financial difficulties, but many would welcome a new vehicle for exchanging information and ideas among all the professions that are fundamentally plant-based.

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