

Climbers, Crawlers and Creepers

Kathleen Ebert-Zawasky

The focus for the last few weeks in Tricentennial Park has been the garden near the children's playground where the chain-link fence is. We have been thinking about what to plant along the fence since the park was first planned. We took the plunge this week.

The first one I want to tell you about is the American wisteria (*Wisteria frutescens*). Most people I mention it to say they didn't know there was an American wisteria. Neither did I. We have had a non-native wisteria in our yard for years and have learned the hard way how aggressive it can be. It has actually killed a few trees by growing around, up and over the top – smothering and toppling them. We should have gone native sooner.

American Wisteria, in contrast, acts like the meek and gentle cousin of its Asian counterparts (Chinese and Japanese) we usually see. The American species does not get as tall or spread as aggressively yet it will produce dense clusters of blue-purple flowers. I can't wait to see how well this climber works out for us.

The next fun find is Dutchman's Pipe. I fell for this one as soon as I saw the light green delicate heart-shaped leaves. The leaves overlap providing a shady area below making this vine a perfect cover for pergolas and arbors. It produces an odd looking flower that resembles an old fashioned smoking pipe used by Dutchmen and Germans. I don't think I have ever seen the flower so I am looking forward to it. Swallowtail butterflies use the leaves to host their eggs. The caterpillars that develop eat the leaves and store some of the plant's chemicals making the adults unpalatable to many predators.

The third, and most controversial vine we planted is the Virginia Creeper. Since I mentioned this plant to a few friends, I have discovered that they either love them or hate them - to my surprise. I chose to include it because I have recently recognized it in my own yard. It is gracefully growing on the forest floor, occasionally climbing a tree providing lovely five-fingered leaves on its way up. It is not dense by any means in these conditions. It often crawls around with Poison Ivy so I think it gets missed by many observers. The flowers are small yellowish-green clusters and the berries are a purplish-black color. They are a good source of food for birds in the winter.

I recently saw it covering a stonewall at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury which gave me a sense of its place in colonial America. I think its brilliant crimson leaves in the fall will be a great addition.



Virginia Creeper covers a stonewall at the Wayside Inn in Sudbury. It was recently planted near the fence in Tricentennial Park.

Since I first became interested in native plants and started researching them, I have been curious as to why the name “Virginia” appears in so many plant names. I have learned that the early settlers in the Commonwealth of Virginia were the first people in the New World to name them. (Let’s not forget what a great gardener Thomas Jefferson was.) Maybe the settlers in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were too busy clearing the land of forests and rocks to have time to catalog and name plants. Or maybe it has to do with the shorter growing season here in New England – come to think of it, it is probably a little of both.

Finally, we did plant one other vine along the fence: the trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*.) I have written about this plant before because it is one of my very favorites and it is currently growing up and around the arbor at the entrance to the park. We thought another splash of it on the fence in the back of the park would add interest and continuity.

Now a few notes from the Tricentennial Park log:

- * After another trip to Garden in the Woods and the native plant sale at Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary, we planted about 37 new plants around the park. Thanks, Andrea, for helping to figure out where everything should go and for all the help planting and weeding.
- * The Monarda has mildew on its leaves but the flowers are blooming. We will cut them back later. Probably due to the heavy rains we had.
- * Two volunteers worked in the park for two weeks (a day here and there,) mostly weeding. Thanks Pat and Sheila!
- * A few Girl Scouts (and Moms) from Troop 80463 planted pretty new plants and weeded Allie’s Garden.
- * Daisy Girl Scouts planted 7 Coreopsis plants on Father’s Day as a public service project. Good Job!
- * PLANTING FOR THIS YEAR IS DONE!
- * Occasionally we see a bird at the birdbath-boulder we hollowed out for them.
- * Catbirds and robins visit frequently.
- * Someone continues to munch one plant in Allie’s Garden. Probably a rabbit.
- * Jon installed a birdhouse and a native bee house: more on those later. Thanks, Jon!
- * A little boy told me he pulled a weed when he saw me weeding. I asked him where and was relieved when he said it was in the playground. Sweet!

Which reminds me: We need volunteers to help with the weeding and watering of the park from now until the end of September. We also need to edge the pathway. If you want to sign up for a two-week slot with a friend or come by yourself, one of us will happily show you what has to be done – and probably work with you. We appreciate all the help we can get since the weeds love our park as much as we do.

If you want to help, please contact me by phone (508-285-9852) or email: zawasky@comcast.net
We will set up a brief orientation for you and you can do it when convenient.

Kathy Ebert-Zawasky served as Tricentennial Park Committee Leader in 2011 and is currently president of the Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton.