



Plants that Have Meaning **Dianne Westlake**

As gardeners, we tend to acquire plants that become simply a part of the scenery. Particularly in a large garden, they are merely background noise. They fill the spaces and add colour but while they provide a function, they just exist. Then there are the plants that stand apart from the rest. The ones that, may not be exotic or rare but because of the name, the sight, smell, touch, sound, taste or in some cases the origin, can be a trigger memories or have special meaning.

I have a bleeding heart that was given to me twenty-five years ago by my son-in-law's grandmother, a wonderful woman who was the guiding force of her family. She had many plants in her garden that she nurtured over the years and shared but the bleeding heart was her favourite and I consider myself to be fortunate to have one. It has moved with me from one home to another and every spring I look for this gift from so many years ago. The best part is that her children, grandchildren great-grandchildren and now great great-grandchildren share this flower and the memories.

Trees are planted as a lasting memorial to a loved one or to mark a special birth or anniversary or in some cases as a shared activity with a child. The child grows up with the tree and the age is referenced in terms of the age of the child.

Houseplants become family heirlooms and are passed from one generation to another. Many have a very long life span but as the original plant fails, cuttings or divisions are taken. And so the cycle of life is carried on.

Then there are the plants that were purchased on vacations. It is probably fortunate we are not able to import plants from outside Canada without a certificate from the Department of Agriculture. Otherwise my carry on bag would be filled with special plants from North America and Europe. Seeds, however, can be imported and I have collected packets on our travels.

We have seen amazing plants, many of which are a challenge to grow in our climate. We have a wisteria that barely survives the cold winds of Peterborough but is glorious in England. In Cincinnati I was impressed with the Dogwoods that lined the streets. Upon arriving home, I found a Kusa Dogwood in full bloom in a local nursery. Knowing it does not belong in our zone, it was planted in the most protected space in our garden. For four springs it has leafed out, although it has only had a dozen blooms. But it is still alive and thriving and one year the conditions will be perfect. I have the eternal optimism of a gardener. Even if we do not get a huge number of blooms, the tree has a great form.

However, travelling within Canada means that plants can be transported. I have plants I have collected – lupines from Reford Gardens and roses from New Brunswick. This is not a huge challenge when travelling by car but flying is a different story. A friend shared that she removed the soil from her acquisitions at the airport in Vancouver so that they would all fit into her carryon bag. If this does not work, we can always ship them home.

A beautiful eight-foot red columnar beech grows in our garden, which was purchased on a bus trip last year. We had seen one at the Montreal Botanical Garden and wanted it for our garden. What a sight we must have been maneuvering this tree and its pot into the cargo area of the bus. Fortunately we had a patient and understanding bus driver.

How many can resist a plant that bears the name of a member of the family or a friend, a hobby or a special place? A sedge with the name ‘Beatlemania’, a hosta with named ‘Captain Kirk’ or a daylily named for a fellow Master Gardener, ‘Beryl Harris’.

There are the plants that bring back the memories of past times. My first plant-related memory as a very young child was enormous swaths of trilliums. With all the development in southern Ontario, it is becoming more difficult to find large patches. We grow a few, which we of course bought at a nursery as opposed to digging them in the wild. Lilacs grew around my Grandparents farmhouse and every spring the scent takes me back to a simpler time. Showier new hybrids have been developed and, while I may marvel at the size and colour of the blooms, the old-fashioned mauve lilacs that grow in abundance along rural roads continue to be my favorite.

At my very first house, I foolishly planted mint near the fence line. It did not take long for the mint to escape from my yard and whenever my neighbour cut his grass, its scent filled the air. Now, whenever I smell mint, I remember and I wonder if he ever did get rid of it.

Plants in our homes and gardens can have the same function as photographs in an album. They bring our memories forward and they trigger stories to share – memories of friendship and generosity, good times and great trips.

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