

VILLAGE VIEW

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It seems only a few years ago, although it's probably been five or more, that I ordered at the annual spring sale of the Barnstable County Conservation District a couple of dozen seedlings. At the appointed time and place, some weeks later, I showed up to collect my order and was handed a bundle of switchy-looking sticks with bare roots on one end.

In addition there was an opportunity to purchase for 25 cents apiece beach plum seedlings, an opportunity I took advantage of.

The seedlings I'd ordered included dogwood trees; in my imagination the trees attained a height of twenty feet and lighted the woodlands around the house with garlands of airy blossoms. Imagination's a wonderful thing; it's a far cry from reality, however.

Those slender switches, nevertheless, will grow eventually to tall trees and each spring will burst into lovely delicate bloom. I need only have patience.

The distribution point chosen by the county was at the edge of a Harwich cranberry bog, a goodly distance from home but centrally located between Bourne and Provincetown. Fair enough. It may have been the long drive home that accounts for the fact that about half the seedlings I planted that evening succumbed to shock, died of thirst, or just didn't like their new habitat. Of the half dozen that survived, all are doing well. More of them might have made it had it not been that once I'd gotten them into the ground and turned my back, I had difficulty finding them again. So natural was the setting, they seemed to melt into the woodland it's conceivable I failed to water them adequately.

Although Cape woodlands and soils are ideal for dogwood growth, any newly transplanted bush or tree requires extra water. Once established, of course, they need no coddling.

That's the type of gardening I do; to eliminate guilt

feelings about neglecting gardening chores, I took the position some years ago that I'd add to the property only plants able to fend for themselves without any special help from me. Once in place, they're on their own. If they live, fine; if they grow, marvelous; if they fail, so be it.

Among the dogwood trees which didn't wither and die, I'm beginning to see satisfactory results. A couple have attained a height of about six feet; it wouldn't surprise me if this year or next some began to bear blossoms.

If even one of them rewards with spring bloom, I'll feel adequately compensated. The few dollars invested will have been well spent.

Of the beach plum bushes tucked into the ground at the same time, I expected little for I've heard tell these are difficult to transplant. Perhaps I was lucky, or perhaps these delightful native shrubs found the environment exactly to their liking. In any case, they thrive.

The beach plum bush is inconspicuous when not in bloom, but after the first season those I planted have bravely flowered each spring. The blossoms are snow-white, delicate, and have fine petals making a tiny flower about a half to three-quarters of an inch wide. The long stamens in the center of each give a fuzzy look to the plant for the white clusters grow profusely on every twiggy stem, almost covering the bush with bloom.

A native of our East Coast from Maine to Virginia, *Prunus Maritimus* (as it is called by botanists) stubbornly clings to life under the most adverse conditions. It seems to grow best in poor sandy soil and actually to enjoy exposure to wintry storms, salt spray and freezing winds. Possibly that's why those I set out have prospered sturdily. Pampered they're not.

The beach plum grows slowly even in ideal locations; most eventually reach a height of about five feet. It tends to spread at the sides and is often wider than it is high. With its irregular, tough dark-gray-to-black branches and deep-green leaves, the plant can be called beautiful only when it's in flower for about ten days in May. The rest of the year, with the important exception of harvest time, the casual observer could easily dismiss a thicket of beach plums as insignificant.

During that brief period the shrub is in bloom, Cape Codders who relish beach plum jelly (and I've never met a Cape Codder who didn't!) make careful note of places the plant grows in the wild that they may return in late August or early September to gather a bucket of fruit. Such locations are becoming more difficult to find, each year.

No Cape Codder feels comfortable trespassing, nor tak-

ing fruit or produce from someone else's garden or orchard. In years past, when large areas of the Cape were open pasture or untended woodland, stopping along a roadside to gather a pailful of beachplums disturbed nobody. Now, however, the places where the grape-sized plum may be harvested are apt to be part of someone's dooryard. Cape Codders who want beach plums may be well-advised to add a few of these bushes to their own landscapes.

Be forewarned, however; there's no guarantee a thicket of beach plum will yield a plum harvest year after year, even though the blooms in spring are prolific. Only if the flowers are pollinated will the plums develop, and only if the blooming season is sunny enough and the rain fall is exactly the right amount, will there be a crop in the fall of the year.

Too much rain or too cool weather at blossomtime may even destroy the fragile flowers before the bees can do their work. Too little rain in July and August may stunt the fruit; then all you'll find on the bush in September are a few shrivelled marble-sized berries.

If all has gone well, on the other hand, the shrub will be laden with reddish purple fruit as big as your thumb. Each has a small pit. The plums, when fully ripe and deep purple in color, have a distinctive plum-like flavor. A rare variety of the plant bears yellow or golden-colored fruit, but these are seldom found on the Cape.

The jelly-lover will not wait until the beach plum is fully ripe to harvest. Jelly from too-ripe plums lacks the tart flavor, highly prized. The ones wanted are those with a mixture of orange-red and purple skin, half-ripe and still sour on the tongue. Eight to ten quarts will make between 20 and 20 small glasses of jelly; enough for the family, plus a half-dozen to give away at Christmastime. Appreciative friends, too unfortunate to have found a plum supply of their own, will bless you for your generosity.

To date my beach plum bushes have yet to yield a plum; like the dogwood trees which have yet to produce a spray of exquisite blossoms, they need a few more years to reach maturity. But since once established neither plum nor dogwood requires cultivation, fertilizer, spraying or extra watering, and given the right growing conditions in soil to which both are native, the time will soon arrive when the plums will not only bloom in spring, but bear in fall, and the dogwood trees will produce beautiful blossoms for my pleasure and yours.

It'll soon be time to pick up another bundle of bare-root switches, hurry home with them, pop them into the earth, and give each a dousing with a half-bucket of water.

Then stand back. And wait five or ten years.