

village view

by Andrea Leonard

"What's so rare as a day in June?" Apparently James Russell Lowell never spent a summer on Cape Cod; if he had, his poem might not have continued. "Then, if ever, come perfect days . . ."

A day in July, such as most of these we've had in the month now slipping away, or a day in August, such as many to come in the month starting next week, might be equally as rare.

These are the blue and golden days of the kind poets call "rare"; we're blest with 'em more often than not, here on Cape Cod in summer.

Although we may take fine weather for granted, in this season, it's worthwhile to dwell on it for longer than a moment. Labor Day's but a month or so away; the remaining days of summer flit past more quickly than any of us realizes.

And as those primary colors of blue and gold combine, they give, as they always have, the greens.

How much time spent just looking at green could be called wasted? To my mind, if we did no more than look at every green, not a moment would be wasted!

If there were words enough in our language to describe all the shades of that one color, green would still amaze us with its variety.

Sitting, sunning, where an acre of woodland spreads to the neighborhood's edge, the darkest greens are to be found in the shadows of the Irish yews, the lightest appear as the sun's rays strike fern fronds and touch the leaves of a white violet.

Brightest are the mosses, their velvety surfaces softening the contours of tree trunks at ground level. There's no brighter green anywhere in view, this summer's afternoon, than that of these smallest.

There're greens of lawns, of weeds, of understory shrubbery. There're greens of towering white pines, stiff pitch pines, spreading cooling oaks, of maples, cherries, birches, of cedar and spruces. And each of the several varieties of each of these trees is a green all its own!

More's to be found in the broadleaved evergreens, those beloved plants that keep their color all year round, herald spring with spectacular flowerings, and perform these miracles while asking little or no attention.

Each spring these shrubs sprout new whorls of leaves as soon as their blooming season's done; now mature, each tender shoot and leaf has taken its own shape and shade of green.

The long narrow rhododendron leaf, the much slimmer, thinner, smaller andromeda, the mountain laurel with slightly thicker leaves, the little rounder leaf of azaleas, green each one surely is, but none resembles any other.

And, among the "wild" plants, the bayberry, the bracken, the sweet fern, the clover, the blueberries — with all the different varieties ranging from ground covers a foot high to feed baby birds while they learn to fly, to high bush, carrying fruit far beyond reach, designed to feed giraffe perhaps — and the honeysuckle, bittersweet, blackberry vines, each green, a different green.

As my eyes move from one to another, each single plant nods, waves, ripples in the gentle breeze, in a different way, is itself singular. The plants and trees nearby stand out, starkly, individually; those at a distance declare their identity in posture, in the way wind moves through them. Taken together, shape, color, habit of growth and movement, each is recognizable, even at a distance, and each is as separately unique as members of the animal kingdom.

An oak, for example, could no more be mistaken for a maple, or a birch for a cherry tree, than a cow could be confused with a horse, or a sheep with a goat.

My powers of description are inadequate to the task of differentiating mountain laurel, andromeda, bayberry and sweet fern. Showing the differences is easy with a sample of each at hand to touch, see and smell. But how can I explain sweet fern is soft and feathery without conjuring up in your mind a vision of a bird's wing? And that's not in the least what I'm trying to convey!

To help you know, we need to see the plants together,

side by side, handle them, touch the surface and underside of the leaf, feel the thickness of this one, the thinness of that, see the smooth shiny leaves of this plant, feel the soft velvety texture of the other. Some I will crumple, that you may know its fragrance.

There are even those I will ask you to taste — the winter-green and the sassafras are two of these. There are other plants, tiny ones in some instances, that bloom, and we will kneel down to admire the pipsissewa with its blossom comparatively large and to learn the sweetness of its perfume. While on our knees we'd be in a fine position to become familiar with the furry leaves of the mayflower, also called trailing arbutus, our state flower.

Each of these plants, whether topping a hundred feet in height or maturing at a few inches above ground level, boasts its very own hue of green.

We've not yet even begun to consider the greens of garden plants nor those of the sea, the marshes, the beaches!

The greens we're speaking of at this time are limited to the commoner plants found at every dooryard this season.

Each is green but each green is an individual color. This, stated simply like that, seems hardly worth noting; only when the comparisons are made, shade to shade, and the richness of the variety is seen separately, tint upon tint, can the astonishing quantity of color be appreciated.

Of the greens, we seem never to tire! Even during winter we find enough of it to relieve the monochromatic landscape. Our cherished pines gleam greenly after deciduous trees drop their leaves and their branches are naught but twiggy.

Some oaks do hold their leaves — leaves turned brown and sere — until spring's new growth forces, in a burst of new life, the final whirl of dry leaves tumbling to rot under spring rains.

How we cherish our pines in winter! How alive they look! It's no wonder we use them to help celebrate Christmas.

Those of our neighbors who winter in southern climes may have forgotten the starkness of January, the drabness of February. When you've finally escaped it, it's not easy to remember or even imagine the visage of winter.

Right now, surrounded by summer's soft fullness, can you feel how cold snow is, recall how heavy it is to shovel from the driveway? Can you shiver to the cut and bite of the wind with the temperature hovering below freezing at noon and below zero at night? Can you do that in July and August on Cape Cod? Squeeze an ice cube in your fist.

It's scarcely believable the Cape's ever anything but gentle; ah, but it is. And that's why it's not a waste of time to take the pulse of summer, to treasure the rich greens, the bright mosses, the pale ferns, the dark yews and hedges.

"What's so rare as a day in June?" Or July? Or August? The Cape gives us glorious day after glorious day . . . and they are not rare . . . but the season is short, all too short.

And autumn, beautiful, brilliant, riotously colorful autumn will follow. And then will come winter. Without the greens we could not survive it. And finally, lagging, reluctant, comes spring.

Full circle now: summer again; golden and blue, and most of all — green.