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THE ARBORESCENT FLORA OF MIDWEST
FARMSTEADS

T. J. FITZPATRICK

While the writer was making a canvass of Buffalo county, Nebraska, during August, 1922, for the purpose of eradicating the common barberry, he became interested in trees and shrubs usually planted in rural dooryards. Buffalo county is situated on the north bank of the Platte river, near the south-central part of Nebraska, in the semiarid region. The rainfall is about twenty-five inches per year as an average, with years of much less, as was the year 1922, when the amount was about nineteen inches.

The arborescent flora about or in the dooryards is a planted one; the purpose is to secure shade and ornamentation. The results obtained depend entirely upon selection, location, and care, as well as skill in planting.

Many dooryards were seen that were absolutely without trees or shrubs of any kind; a little buffalo grass or other native grasses, a few ruderals or native plants of the nearby prairie made up the scanty vegetation of the yard. In other words the dwelling had been erected on the native sod and the vegetation present was a remnant of the original one along with a few ruderals in competition with human occupation. Under such conditions during the sunny days of the long summer drought there was a maximum of desiccation which produced an environment unfavorable to either plant or human occupation. As a consequence abandoned farmsteads were much too frequently in evidence for the good of the former occupants or of the present community.

The general favorites among the shrubs are lilac, spiræa, matrimony vine, rose, and in frequency are about in the order named though the choice of the pioneers was evidently lilac and matrimony vine, the spiræa being a later introduction. Most other shrubs were of much later planting, some only in recent years. The early trees were cottonwood, box elder, white elm, soft maple, ash; later plantings included juniper, black locust, black walnut, hackberry, catalpa, mulberry, osage orange, etc.

The writer observed on the prairie a few groves of considerable

extent which had their origin in early plantings, doubtless prompted by a tree-planting statute. Some of these are in excellent condition, having a good location and a suitable selection of trees; others present an indifferent appearance, the location being poor and the trees unsuitable to the environment. In two or more places it was seen that the tree plantings were rapidly becoming less in extent, the encroaching prairie taking up the abandoned area. The average conditions are suitable to tree growth but the extremes inhibit in a poor or indifferent location.

Lilac is the shrub most frequently seen in the region under consideration. It was planted as a hedge along the border of the dooryard or as single shrubs or clumps almost anywhere in the yard. When planted as a hedge it may occur along any one or more of the four sides or occasionally it appears as a wing out from any corner of the house. All of the old plantings seem to be those with broadly ovate leaves and blue or purplish to white flowers (*Syringa vulgaris*). Some of the older and many of the later plantings have narrowly ovate leaves and white flowers (*Syringa persica*). In Buffalo county the lilac rarely grows higher than six to eight feet. Often it is pruned to give a desirable ornamental hedge effect. The lilac is hardy and does well in this region but during the present drought it was noticeable that conditions had nearly reached the limit for its continuance. No evidence was found that any had succumbed during a previous drought.

The lilac was evidently much in favor with the early pioneers. This is apparent not only from the age of the bushes but also from their occurrence about long-ago abandoned house sites. In many cases I noticed that practically every trace of a pioneer dwelling may be gone save for a single clump of lilac. Sometimes of the dwelling nothing was to be seen save a scarcely visible quadrangle, a remnant of the foundation, or more or less of a depression indicating the former cave or cellar; but the lilac clump was remaining as a solitary sentinel of the past and forgotten. In one instance I found a lone clump of lilac in the midst of a cornfield. It was the last trace left of an ancient dooryard.

Spiraea or bridal-wreath is the next shrub in frequency and seeming favor. It is planted both as a hedge and as single shrubs; the hedge being placed as a border and the shrubs in any convenient opening. This shrub is well adapted to this region, showing little if any discomfort from the drought. The bright green foliage

is a welcome sight at any time and the shrubs are very beautiful during the flowering period. The species usually found seems to be *Spiraea van houttei*.

Matrimony vine (*Lycium vulgare*) is a frequently observed shrub, sometimes planted as a hedge, but more often as a single shrub. It does very well but has the bad habit of spreading and in some places becoming a pest as a weed. When planted in a row with a low trellis through the middle it makes a rather striking ornamental hedge.

Roses are commonly planted as single shrubs, occasionally in rows or thickets. Two or three species are usually seen, as the climbing rose, the eglantine, etc.

Cottonwood was often planted by the pioneers either for shade, when only a few were planted, or for windbreaks when many were planted closely in rows. These latter plantings were of greater or lesser extent in both directions. The larger plantings are mainly in the Platte, Loup, and Wood river valleys; only small plantings occur on the uplands. Many of the early plantings are now large trees with forest conditions and the usual under growth. The plantings were around or adjacent to the farmsteads and if large extended along the fields adjacent to the highway. The most extensive planting and one of the older ones that I observed was on the south side of the Platte river, southeast of Kearney. Here several closely-planted rows for miles flank the highway which runs eastward, the rows gradually thinning down to one before ending. The species usually seen was the western one known as *Populus sargentii*. The cottonwood has some undesirable qualities and does not seem to be much in favor with recent planters.

Red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) is frequently planted, perhaps a few for ornament, but more often in rows and then less for ornament but more as a windbreak. The red cedar does well in this region, needing but little care to prevent the ill effects of drought. The tree is often badly infected with the fungus popularly known as cedar apples (*Gymnosporangium macropus*). As a result all the neighboring apple trees were found to be badly infected with the cedar rust. The cedar has so many good qualities that the owners feel constrained to retain their trees in spite of its bad qualities. The apple crop, however, is not seriously considered as the region has not been developed as a fruit country.

Box elder (*Acer negundo*) has apparently always been in much

favor as it grows quickly and gives the maximum amount of shade in the least time. It occurs planted as single trees or in rows for windbreaks.

Mulberry (*Morus rubra*) is infrequently seen as a door yard planting, but more often as a hedge or windbreak. The later plantings of mulberry seem to be the French mulberry (*Morus alba*). This one is often planted thickly in a row and kept trimmed down to about four feet in height as an ornamental hedge.

Black locust (*Robinia pseudacacia*) was not often seen but it occurs as a windbreak or as a shade tree. It is very pretty when in blossom but is subject to insect attacks and then is unsightly.

Honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) is not often planted. This tree has many good qualities and does not seem to be subject to fungus or insect attacks. All the trees observed were fine ones, the dark green foliage presenting a pleasing sight. The drought apparently did not affect them. This tree should be more frequently planted, using the thornless variety. One farm about eight miles north of Riverdale has extensive plantings of this species.

Common barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*) was not often seen about the dooryards. All that I found occurred as single clumps and in one hedge. Every specimen was badly infected with the black stem rust of wheat (*Puccinia graminis*). The harboring of the common barberry is now prohibited by law in most of the wheat growing states. All the specimens found were dug up.

Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) was not often seen about the farmsteads though frequently observed in the town. This species is now replacing the common barberry in many places.

Green ash (*Fraxinus viridis*) is a frequently occurring tree, being planted either for shade or for a windbreak. During this season it suffered much from the drought.

Plum (*Prunus americana*) is not infrequent about farmyards. When this species occurs there is usually a thicket of them about the side or end of the yard or in the field adjacent. When a few are planted or if seeds are dropped in likely places the number of individuals increases rapidly and they spread along the fences or over uncultivated places and thus form the thickets so often seen.

Bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera tartarica*) is not infrequently planted as a solitary ornamental bush.

Mock orange (*Philadelphus coronarius*) occurs occasionally. Its numerous white flowers make it very ornamental. At other times for lack of care it is an indifferent bush.

Snowball (*Viburnum opulus*) is not commonly seen in many dooryards and usually only one or two clumps will be found at any one place.

Privet (*Ligustrum vulgare*) is infrequent and when found it occurs as a hedge. It grows fairly well and when properly trimmed it gives a pleasing background to proper plantings about the yard.

White elm (*Ulmus americana*) is often chosen as a shade tree and when planted with reference to proper space it develops a fine shade tree with no undesirable qualities. More of this species should be planted.

Black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) was observed a number of times. It does fairly well in lower places which receive drainage and hence have a deeper soil and more moisture.

Osage orange (*Machura aurantiaca*) has been frequently planted along the borders of yards or roadsides as a hedge. It is quite effective but has undesirable qualities and its use is now infrequent.

Soft maple (*Acer saccharinum*) is frequently planted for shade or windbreak. In the moister situations it does well but in the drier situations it does not fare so well.

Russian olive (*Eleagnus angustifolia*) has been frequently planted during the last fifteen or twenty years. It is quite ornamental and seems to resist the drought readily.

Tree of heaven (*Ailanthus glandulosa*) is occasionally planted for shade.

Service-berry (*Amelanchier canadensis*) is sometimes planted. Here this species is shrubby, grows in clumps, and usually has the appearance of a hedge.

Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) is not often planted. In the lower situations it does fairly well but grows feebly in the higher and drier places. The leaves are frequently covered with insect galls.

Virginia creeper (*Ampelopsis quinquefolia*) is occasionally planted but frequently occurs spontaneously.

Catalpa (*Catalpa speciosa*) is not infrequent in many parts of the county. The many large flowers make the tree very ornamental and the numerous large leaves give a dense foliage with much shade.

Choke cherry (*Prunus virginiana*) is occasionally planted and it also occurs spontaneously in border thickets. Here it is usually a shrub and does very well.

Lombardy poplar (*Populus dilatata*) is occasionally planted. It does not seem to thrive very well.

White poplar (*Populus alba*). This species was observed about a few farmsteads.

Austrian pine (*Pinus austriaca*) is occasionally planted. The individuals examined were small trees and seemed to be doing fairly well.

Clammy locust (*Robinia viscosa*). A few specimens were infrequently noticed.

Trumpet creeper (*Tecoma radicans*) is frequently seen at some angle of the house or other convenient location.

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