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THE FLORA OF NEW ENGLAND

A Manual for the Identification of All Vascular Plants
including Ferns and Fern Allies
Growing without Cultivation in New England

by Frank Conklin Seymour

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FOREWORD

When vast and unexplored areas of the tropical world lie still unscanned by the inquisitive eye of the naturalist, what would draw the attention of a botanist to the flora of New England? Perhaps this question should come to my mind more naturally than to many, since I am a plant explorer of exotically fascinating wilds of the Amazon and the Andes. Yet it is perhaps the botanist pioneering in poorly known floras who can most immediately and deeply appreciate the meticulous distillation of collecting and research represented in a work such as Seymour's Flora of New England. How fortunate that we still have botanists willing to heed the familiar and remind us of the wealth that surrounds us in our own vegetational environment.

As strong as the call of the exotic may be, we have just begun to look into the composition of our local temperate floras for potentially useful plants. Of the numerous so called "wonder drugs" which, during the past thirty-five years, have helped revolutionize the practice of medicine, several of the most spectacular have come from well known local species. We should recall that the False Hellebore -- Veratrum viride -- one of the most toxic species of our New England flora, once employed by American Indians as a kind of ordeal poison, has yielded a large number of alkaloids, several of which modern medicine has found to have cardiac-depressive properties and to be valuable as hypotensive agents. The poisonous May Apple -- Podophyllum peltatum -- of our forests was occasionally used by the Huron and Iroquois Indians for suicide and the Penobscot valued it as a "cure" for tumours, a use which the early English colonists learned from the natives. Recent research has shown that extracts of the May Apple contain resinous constituents with tumour-inhibiting properties useful especially in treating certain papillomas, especially uterine warts.

How many other potentially valuable economic plants may be found in our own New England flora? The first step in any study towards this end must be the availability of good monographic and floristic treatments -- the botanical foundation for sound phytochemical and pharmacological investigations.

But as intriguing as possible discovery of new useful plants may be, we must never minimize nor forget the academic value of efforts like Seymour's Flora of New England: the understanding and appreciation of the vegetational cover of that part of the earth where we live and breathe. In these days of excessive emphasis on the practical, the importance of the approach and value of "pure science" is too often forgotten. Perhaps it is here precisely that Seymour's labour of love offers its greatest contribution.

As a botanist devoted to tropical floras, I find a curious parallel between the English plant explorer of the Amazon and Andes, Richard Spruce, and Frank Seymour. Both enthusiastic yet critical collectors, both compilers of floristic works -- they have in common an outlook which today is rare and refreshing. This outlook has been beautifully expressed by Spruce, a specialist in the bryophytes, yet who strikingly increased our knowledge of many tropical economic plants such as quinine and rubber, when he wrote: "I like to look on plants as sentient beings, which live and enjoy their lives. . . when they are beaten to pulp or powder in the apothecary's mortar, they lose most of their interest for me. It is true that the Hepaticae have hardly as yet yielded any substance to man capable of stupefying him or of forcing his stomach to empty its contents, nor are they good for food; but if men cannot torture them to his uses or abuses, they are infinitely useful where God has placed them, as I hope to live to show; and they are, at the least, useful to and beautiful in themselves -- surely the primary motive for every individual existence".

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