

Did You Know? ~ Pride of India or Chinaberry . . . By Herbert Ravenel Sass

For ages I have been meaning to write, and at Gates Mills on my desk is a file of things that I wanted to discuss, clippings from Woods and Waters. Among them I know is an article about “quail.” For a number of years, the late James Henry Rice wrote to me quite frequently, and I have a file of his letters. All quite fascinating, Mr. Rice always contended our Bobwhites were not quail, but partridges.

Your request the other day for information concerning the *Pride of India* (my favorite name for the *lelia azedorach* or *Chinaberry*) brings forth the enclosed. The older Negroes here always called the tree “Friday Vindy,” their interpretation of Pride of India. At the time, I made up my mind to grow the tree for cabinet wood. I went personally to the Forest Service in Washington, and their files were searched for information as to who had introduced the tree into this country. No luck. Then the *Arnold Arboretum* approached, but still there were no results. I am sure it reached this continent via the West Indies. Probably early settlers from Barbados or one of the other British colonies introduced it to the Carolinas. You will see in the account from *Arboretum et Fructicetum Britannicum* (trees and shrubs of Britain), that it was known in greenhouses in England since 1656. I have a set of this publication which I bought in Edinburgh, for it contains a long account of my direct ancestor, Andrew Heron, Laird of Bargally, who was a very noted botanist in his day. He introduced several hitherto unknown plants and trees into England.

I think one of these is the so-called *Monkey Puzzle* tree. There is an enormous specimen of this tree at Bargally. I have visited the place several times. For some years it was rented by the Duke of Bedford (the late 11th Duke) for a shooting box. It is near Newton Stewart in southwest Scotland. The Duke sent me fifty acorns from the great oaks at Bargally. I grew from them 49 English oaks. Some are here at the Borough, the others at Gates Mills. Those at Gates Mills (Ohio) have outgrown those here, the climate is better for them there, I suppose. The Duke and I became great friends, and I sent him live oak acorns from *The Borough* for his principal residence, Woburn Abbey. I visited him there the year before he died.

Now that cedar has become so scarce it occurred to me that *Pride of India* could take its place for storage chests. Cedar is no good as a moth-repellant anyway. Moths thrive in cedar chests unless they are discouraged by chemicals of some sort. As for *Pride of India*, it seems abhorrent to them, and it is a beautiful wood besides, with no perceptible odor.

When I leave here in the late Spring, the carpets in the rooms we occupy are vacuum cleaned, then *Pride of India* leaves are scattered over them, and the rugs rolled up. A moth never goes near them, and a moth has never been seen in the old wardrobe described in Mrs. Stubb's article in *The State Magazine*. The width of the boards in the doors of this wardrobe, which was made here by my great-grandfather's slave carpenters, ca. 1820, would indicate a tree at least 24" in diameter, so the *Pride of India* must have been introduced quite early into South Carolina.

The Guignards in Columbia told me that they had read in a book in their library, that the tree was introduced by one Dr. Cheny (or Chany, not sure) and that it was properly called Cheny berry, also that when the Negroes call it "Chany berry" they were correct. We always thought it was their way of saying China berry. The Guignards were never able to locate this account of the introduction of the tree, and I have never discovered a reference anywhere to this elusive "Dr. Chanty." I am inclined to discount this theory.

My attempt to grow the tree has not been too successful. At first, I tried planting the seed. Practically no germination. Finally, the State Forest Service grew some for me, but they found that they would not germinate unless they first had a chemical bath, which corresponded to the acids to which the seed are subjected in the intestinal tract of birds. It is a peculiar circumstance that even though the ground beneath a *Pride of India* tree is covered with berries, no young ones ever spring up, but along ditch banks and other places where they have been dropped by birds, they grow and flourish.

Articles other than the one enclosed attribute the origin of the tree to South China and the Vale of Kashmir. I think it is a foregone conclusion that it did originate in this region before it appeared in the Mediterranean regions.

Article by Virginia S. White

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