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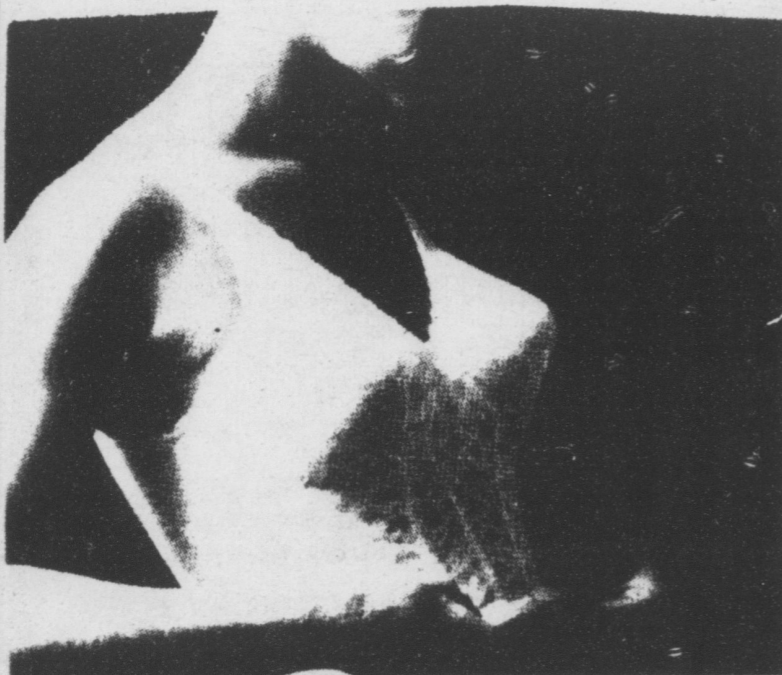
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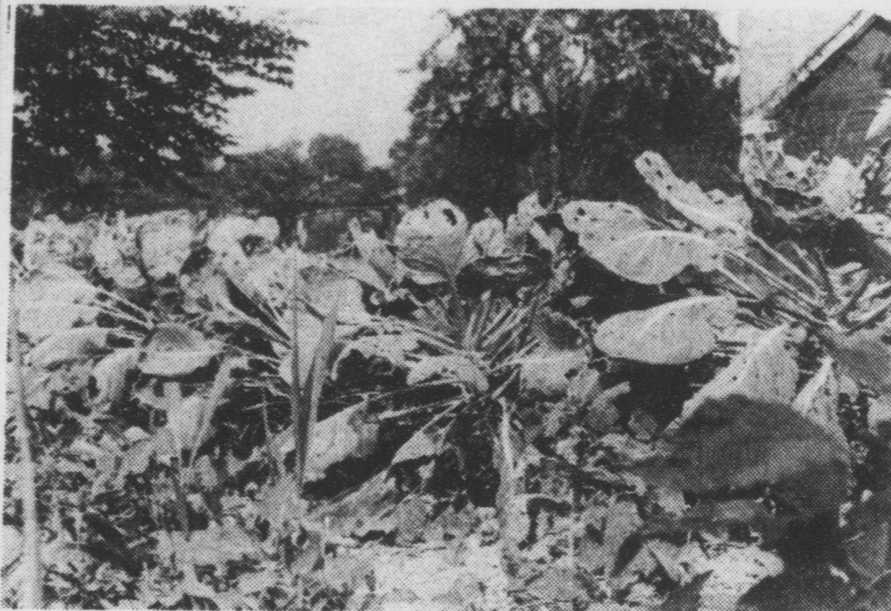
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It's easy to raise a good crop of weeds



by Ralph Miller

So I have to boast to my friends about my weeds and I do have two beauties in particular. On either side of the wineberry bushes (courtesy of an unknown distributor) growing in and out of the front branches of a hemlock as one approaches the rear or west side of the yard are 2 magnificent specimens of *Sonchus oleraceus* otherwise known as the common Sow-Thistle. There is nothing common about these. One is 8 feet 7 inches tall, and the other 8 feet 10 inches. - I measured them with the help of a stepladder and a 10 foot tape measure, - One of the leaves measured 17 inches long and 12 1/4 inches wide, a fair size I must say. These specimens reflect the advantage of not being a gardenér, otherwise they might have been yanked out long ago. If you are wondering whether perchance you might have such a variety, look for a medium tall plant with stouth smooth stalk, light green leaves sharply incised and cleft somewhat like a dandelion leaf with sharp pointed lobes clasping the stem and a cluster of small yellow dandelion-like flowers at the top.

Purslane also comes to mind, the almost prostrate potherb with fat reddish or greenish, juicy stems, thick fleshy green leaves and inconspicuous yellow flowers, of which I have pulled at least a peach basket full. I couldn't bring myself to cook them but threw them on the compost pile to help in another way. As you probably know, treacle mustard, Canada thistle, and the common sow-thistle are naturalized from Europe and so also reportedly was purslane. However a recent issue of Smithsonian magazine notes that recently two scientists had found pollen and seeds of *Portulaca oleracea* (our purslane) in precisely datable sediment layers (before the time of Columbus) of Crawford Lake near Toronto and purslane was apparently

used by agricultural Indians as a potherb just as in Europe. Which does not prove much except that there is always something new to be learned and that even botany is not always precise.

But enough of weeds. Our resident birds have continued to be a pleasure as weed seed, grub and insect eaters, as well as for their songs and grace of flight (some). I don't know how much the weather was responsible but we had a noticeable number of casualties throughout this spring in the bird world as evidenced by numerous cracked or unhatched eggs lying about the grounds and at least 7 dead nestlings or immature birds which we saw. But this hasn't seemed to affect the numbers about here appreciably. Among the resident birds are a pair of son, sparrows and a pair of Carolina wrens who appear to be nesting in the yard area, although we haven't spotted their nests as yet, and who have especially graced our place with song.

There is another songster whose song many hear but little suspect from whence it comes. I am speaking of the catbird whom one could

say is cursed with an inapt name. It is true the catbird occasionally emits a short grating alarm note, reminding one somewhat of the cry of a cat, if one approaches too closely. But it is one of the most accomplished singers we have. Its melody is rich and varied and at times even seems to express moods. There are at least two pair currently nesting here, one in the rose hedge where it can be seen slipping in to feed its young.

For some time there was entertainment out one of the corner bedroom windows where a purple grackle had built its nest 5 feet out and slightly downward from the window in the top of a viburnum bush.

As the adults approached the nest with food, a series of small cries would go up and, as if at the push of a button, three small yellow-billed, gaping mouths lined inside with bright red would automatically rear up and out of the nest. Some time after a storm one week we happened to notice both nest and nestlings gone but we hadn't kept tabs closely enough to hazard a guess as to whether they had grown enough to escape the nest or whether the nest had been blown down and them with it, although we never did spot any trace of the nest blown.

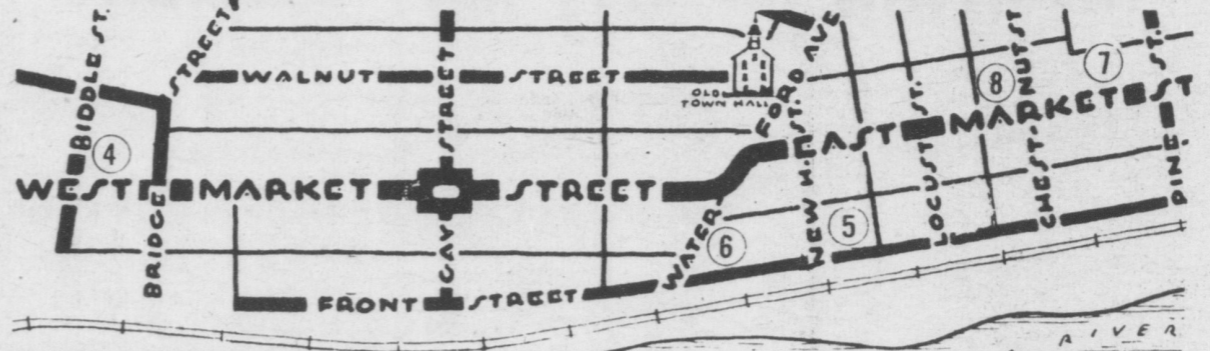
As an odd note I might point out that the small white egrets you see flying overhead toward the river in small flocks in late afternoon or evening are usually egrets apparently headed for the islands in the Susquehanna for the night.

There have not been any great number or variety of butterflies about the yard,

mostly white cabbage butterflies and several varieties of small blues. But last week one of the so-called thistle butterflies, a red admiral, fluttered across the lawn, through the shrubbery and out of sight. If you see a butterfly about 2 inches across with a dark ground color, with bright orange red bands across the forewing and at the other margins of the hindwing, and with prominent white spots on a black area at the apex of the forewing, you can be pretty sure it is the Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*).

For the last, I have been saving one of my discoveries relative to one of the reasons my flower borders have turned into the jungle they are. I wrote on an earlier day how I had been pulling goatsbeard plants by the handful out of the flower borders. I left a very few as curiosities. One attained a fair size. Since those large seed ball heads seem to contain quite a few seeds and are so well-equipped to float like a parachute, I theorized that perhaps nature herself had had a hand in the wide distribution of plants in my garden. So I counted the seed balls and flower heads on that goatsbeard plant and came up with a count of 97 on the first try and 105 on the second. Then I counted the number of seeds on two different seed balls and came up with a count of 94 and 115 seeds respectively. Therefor I figure (averaging out) that 100 seed balls with 100 seeds each would come to about 10,000 seeds for one goatsbeard plant. I am beginning to understand why I am such a prolific weed grower.

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