

Letter

Runner Beans running late!

9 February 2005

I have made a number of enquiries about the lack of flowers on the runner beans in Dunedin this season. Only one person had flowers but they were a month or more later than usual. About eight other gardeners said no flowers but plenty of healthy leaves.

My neighbour's and my plants had their first flowers opening yesterday. So maybe they will be in time for us to eat beans this summer!!!

I think it is still worth a mention in the newsletter that normal flowering would be December and that the unusual cold weather appears to have affected the flowering time. This has resulted in the plants not flowering until nearly halfway through February.

The cold weather has not affected the usual "jack and the beanstalk" like growth on the height of the vines, nor the abundance of their leaves. This was a similar story to that experienced by other bean growers contacted.

17 March

Beans at last, and extra tasty after so long a wait! Several people have let me know that they had their first picking last week.

Audrey Eagle
Broad Bay

Notes and Articles

North & South

Lloyd Esler

A Northland visit

A recent trip through Northland makes me glad I live in Southland. Our weed problems - which I rank in order as *Pinus contorta*, gorse, Chilean flame creeper, broom, sycamore and blackberry - are nothing compared to Northland. There is certainly gorse there but it is spindly and unhappy and easily penetrated by rapidly-growing natives. Wattles, Manchurian wild rice, the giant reed *Arundo donax*, pampas, woolly nightshade and coral tree *Erythrina x sykesii* all grow in abundance. The latter is interesting. Groves of coral trees are appearing along the roadsides and although it is sterile it spreads vegetatively from any scrap of twig. Kikuyu grass forms a swathe a metre deep, rolling over fences and submerging the natives.

A feature of the north is the neglected land. Some valleys must have the most fertile land in New Zealand and were once pasture but are now disappearing under a sea of woolly nightshade and gorse which is relentlessly encroaching on the obligatory clusters of shacks with peeling paint, large dogs and rusting car bodies. Northland can grow things that we can't. Tamarillos, oranges, grapefruit, kumara, taro, bananas and even sugar cane grow where people can be bothered planting them.

I have decided that there are six Northland species that it is a pity aren't part of the southern landscape. These are pohutukawa, nikau, kauri, mamaku, pink-flowered manuka and mangrove. Highlights of the trip were the Trounson Kauri forest walk, a visit to the Matakohe Kauri Museum and Tane Mahuta.

Eek, shouldn't have planted that one!

One of the best ways to identify an unknown plant is to dig it up, plant it in your garden and watch what happens. Often a stranger makes a welcome addition to the garden flora but sometimes things can go wrong. Sorrel *Rumex acetosa* is an edible plant which is rare in Southland. It grows around Halfmoon Bay and odd plants turn up elsewhere. I had a decent-sized ex-Stewart Island one growing which produced copious pollen each year but never seeds as the species is dioecious. I collected another in a ditch at Mabel Bush, a female, and planted that. It didn't take long to see that this was a mistake. Now thousands of seedlings are coming up in the garden and through the lawn. I seem to have unleashed a super-weed. Despite much spraying and weeding there is still plenty around and I am keen to stop it invading an unsuspecting world. Another Stewart Island weed, Shamrock pea *Parochetus communis*, took only days to make a bolt for freedom when I planted a small piece. It outgrew its pot at an extraordinary rate and was soon established in the moderate shade of a native border. A major weeding effort eradicated it from the garden. I still have it but confined to a pot. A third disaster was umbrella sedge *Cyperus eragrostis*, an attractive, naturalised species occasional in ditches. I thought it would be a nice addition to the modest collection of sedges and it grew very encouragingly. It seeded profusely and started taking over a wet patch of lawn. It also is the subject of an extermination campaign. Others that you want to grow doggedly resist cultivation. Penny cress, *Thlaspi arvense*, is an example. It shows up occasionally but transplanted specimens die quickly and the seeds come to nothing.

Whitlow grass

Whitlow grass *Erophila verna* is a small cress up to about 12 cm. Until five years ago I had found it twice in Southland, both as single plants in roadside gravel. Now hundreds of kilometres of Southland roads are fringed with it. With thale cress, *Arabidopsis thaliana*, it is the dominant roadside gravel species, often forming a long swathe of grey or mauve. It's easy to see how it spreads with the tiny seeds being tumbled along in the wake of cars. The seeds are a popular food item for sparrows and finches, especially greenfinches, but the habitat makes feeding hazardous as the number of squashed birds will confirm.

Invading alga

The ecology of Southland rivers is set to change dramatically in the next few years with the arrival of the freshwater alga *Didymosphenia geminata*. At present it seems to be confined to the Mararoa River and the Waiiau but it will inevitably spread further.

Didymosphenia is a diatom that rapidly forms dense colonies on rocks and logs in clean waterways. These are green-brown and have the texture of wet cotton wool. Overseas, the species is known for its ability to spread rapidly, choking waterways and reducing the habitat of invertebrate and fish life. As it can't be eradicated, Environment Southland has a containment programme instead, with fishermen, swimmers and boaters urged to take care when moving from one river system to another.

Figs. Top right to left; *Erophila verna*, *Rumex acetosa*, *R. acetosella*.

Below; clumps of *Didymosphenia geminata* on a rock from Mavora River. – Lloyd Estler, 2005

