

THE STORY OF PLANTS: FIREWEED

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A SMARTLY DRESSED RETIREE walked into Seattle Garden Center in 1990. She remained straight forward as she asked me, “Do you sell fireweed seed?” My smile barely suppressed a chuckle. I was a young snobby horticulturist then, to whom the thought of planting fireweed seemed absurd.

Seattle Garden Center in the Pike Place Market had a serious, some said the best on the West Coast, seed selection. Yet we did not sell fireweed seed. If I had been smart I would have spent my weekends in the blast zone of Mount St. Helens, a pink lava flow of fireweed (*Chamerion angustifolium*), collecting the downy seed. With each plant producing over 80,000 seeds I could have made a killing in the market. You see this smartly dressed retiree was not the first or the last tourist to disembark in Seattle in search of fireweed seed after seeing acres of it blanketing Alaska where it flourishes.

Fireweed, or willowherb as it is also known, is in the Onagraceae, or evening primrose family. Many weedy species in the genus *Epilobium*, with which fireweed was once lumped and with which it shares a common name, are perennial and annual natives to the West Coast. They produce abundant easily airborne seed, so I’m sure you’ve pulled plenty from your gardens. A great deal of research is being conducted on this genus which shares many medicinal properties with evening primrose, *Oenothera biennis*.

When fireweed, which I prefer to call willowherb, seeded into one of my heavily planted mixed borders, I left it. I believe like Piet Oudolf that “willowherb



Fireweed or willowherb

is such a common plant that hardly anyone sees just how beautiful it is.” I find its beauty comparable to other members of the Onagraceae, like the popular fuchsias and California fuchsia (formerly *Zauschneria*, now in the genus *Epilobium*). The few cultivars of *Chamerion* are rarely available in the U.S., even ‘Alba’, said to be less aggressive and which Beth Chatto calls a “pale, ghostly” beauty, is impossible to find.

Willowherb arrived late to the British Isles and probably as a garden

plant. It is an excellent pot herb: its young shoots and leaves similar to spinach. The often referred to “Orient purple” color of the flowers was coveted by medieval and Renaissance gardeners who gave it names like French willow and Persian willow. Later it became known as rose bay willow or poor man’s oleander, rose bay being the common name for oleander. More recently residents of war torn London named it “bombweed” because after World War II it covered acres of that city.

Speculative botanists believe that willowherb, a Eurasian native, was introduced to the New World a long time ago. The first travelers entering this continent 15,000 years ago may have brought its downy seed stuffed with duck feathers into their bedding, a common practice among indigenous peoples until recent history. Sacred to Siberian shamans who brewed an ale from the pith often mixed with the mushroom fly agaric to induced visions, it may have been deliberately imported, possibly making it one of the first introduced species to Alaska and the lower 48.

I like to believe I’m a smart traveler, light and easily airborne. I like to believe I’m an even smarter gardener. Though I am not smart enough to have a smartphone or support our use of smart bombs, I am smart enough to make mistakes, big and small, even where they end up, like leaving willowherb in my borders, not being mistakes at all. 🌱

Read more of Daniel’s thoughts on plants and gardening on his blog www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com.