

Barberry Bushes, Colonial Enemy

Currently, we are seeing the attempts of various state and federal agencies to eradicate mosquitoes carrying the West Nile Virus. This unwanted immigrant arrived on our shores in the New York City area in 1998 or 1999. One of the first signs of its presence was an unusually high number of crows dying. In 1999, six human deaths were attributed to the disease. It is too early to tell how we will fare this season, but the outlook is not encouraging.

Elected officials are sitting on a hotseat. To do nothing would mean political suicide; to call for spraying, given the density of population in the Metropolitan Area, is at best an iffy proposition. The course being followed at this time calls for selective spraying, primarily in areas where the deaths of birds can be traced to the virus.

The problem with this course of action is that an insecticide effective on mosquitoes will also decimate the populations of countless other insects considered to be beneficial to humans, such as honey bees, moths, butterflies and wasps, without which flowering plants cannot produce fruit and replace themselves. This is not to mention the myriad of other insects out there of which we have no knowledge at all. I'm certain that there are scores of them which perform services for humans that haven't yet been identified by the scientific community. Yet we forge ahead, giving out warnings to stay indoors on evenings when the spraying helicopters are scheduled for overflights, as well as reminders to empty every container holding water in which the mosquito larvae could hatch.

The futility of our attempts to rid ourselves of an unwanted form of plant or animal goes back to Colonial times. Recently, the Colebrook Historical Society received from Mr. & Mrs. William Rockwell a volume of laws, which were supplied by the Colonial legislature to each of the towns within the Colony of Connecticut. The impressive title it goes by is: *Acts and Laws of His Majesty ~ English Colony of Connecticut, in New England, in America, 1769.*

On page 13 there appears the following law, which seems to have been directed at the same sort of problem that we face 240 years later with our West Nile Virus. It reads like this:

An Act Concerning Barberry Bushes:

Whereas the abounding of Barberry bushes is thought to be very hurtful, by occasioning (or at least increasing) the blasting [blight] of English grain. [Wheat]

Be it therefore enacted by the Governor, Council and Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, that the inhabitants of the several towns in this colony may, and they are hereby fully empowered, at their annual town meetings, to determine and agree upon the utter destroying of the said bushes within their respective townships; and upon the time when, and manner how the same shall be done.

And if any of the inhabitants of such town or towns so agreeing shall oppose the cutting down said bushes within their fields and enclosures, and forbid the other inhabitants coming thereinto for that end, they shall incur the penalty of five shillings [\$1.66] to be paid into the treasury of the town wherein they dwell.

And if any such person or persons shall thenceforward continue to oppose the cutting said bushes, as aforesaid, they shall also incur the penalty of two shillings [67¢] per month until they shall declare to the selectmen of such town their free consent for the entering into such fields or enclosures, and destroying the said bushes therein growing.

Said penalties, on the complaint of the select men of such town, to be recovered by distraint [a lien.] on the goods or chattels of the person or persons so offending.

Providing nonetheless, that if any person or persons have any of said bushes, the which they make use of or depend upon for a fence, such person or persons shall not incur either of the aforesaid penalties, till after just satisfaction to them be made by the town, as they and the selectmen agree, or as two or three indifferent men chosen by said parties or appointed by the civil authority, (who are empowered to appoint the same) shall judge just and reasonable. [In other words, the town had to compensate the fence owner for his destroyed property.]

All their effort came to naught, as a walk just about anywhere in Colebrook or the surrounding towns will attest. Today there are several kinds of Barbeny growing in our area. The one the colonial law targeted is named the Common Barberry. My copy of *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Wildflowers* lists the range of the Common Barberry as Southern Ontario to Nova Scotia; south to Delaware and Pennsylvania; west to Missouri; north to Minnesota. I'd say that it is pretty well established.

I wish those who are attempting to protect us from West Nile Virus well, but at the same time, I can't help but think that they won't have any more success than did their predecessors of two and one third centuries ago.

Historic Bytes

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