

Kalmia - Mountain Laurel

—A Classic of Science

Botany

TRAVELS INTO NORTH AMERICA; containing its Natural History, and a circumstantial Account of its Plantations and Agriculture in general, with the Civil, Ecclesiastical and Commercial State of the Country, the Manners of the Inhabitants, and several curious and important remarks on various Subjects. By Peter Kalm. Translated into English by John Reinhold Forster. 3 volumes. Warrington: MDCCLXX (1770).

NOVEMBER the 20th, 1748. The *Spoon tree*, which never grows to a great height, we saw this day in several places. The *Swedes* here have called it thus, because the Indians who formerly lived in these provinces, used to make their spoons and trowels of the wood of this tree. In my cabinet of natural curiosities, I have a spoon made of this wood by an Indian, who has killed many stags and other animals on the very spot where *Philadelphia* afterwards was built; for in his time that spot was yet covered with trees and shrubs. The English call this tree a *Laurel*, because its leaves resemble those of the *Laurocerasus*. Dr. *Linnaeus*, conformable to the peculiar friendship and goodness which he has always honoured me with, has been pleased to call this tree *Kalmia foliis ovatis, corymbis terminalibus*, or *Kalmia latifolia*. It succeeds best on the side of hills, especially on the north side, where a brook passes by; therefore on meeting with some steep places (on hills) towards a brook, or with a steep side of a hill towards a marsh, you are sure to find the *Kalmia*. But it frequently stands mixed among beech trees. The higher the *Kalmias* stand on the north side of a mountain, the less they grow: I have seen them not only in *Pennsylvania* and *New Jersey*, but even in *New York*, but there they are more scarce: I never found them beyond the forty-second deg. of north lat. though I took ever so great care to look for them: they have the quality of preserving their fine green leaves throughout winter, so that when all other trees have lost their ornaments, and stand quite naked, these cheer the woods with their green foliage. About the month of *May* they begin to flower in these parts, and then their beauty rivals



Photograph by Wild Flower Preservation Society.

A pupil of the great Linnaeus describes a plant of North America which his master had named in his honor.

that of most of the known trees in nature: the flowers are innumerable, and sit in great bunches. Before they open, they have a fine red colour, but as they are expanded, the sun bleaches them, so that some are quite white; many preserve the colour of roses. Their shape is singular, for they resemble a crater of the ancients: their scent however is none of the most agreeable. In some places it was customary to adorn the churches on Christmas Day or New Year's Day with the fine branches of this tree, which are then thick covered with leaves.

But these trees are known for another remarkable quality; their leaves are poison to some animals, and food for others: experience has taught the people that when sheep eat of these leaves, they either die immediately, or fall very sick, and recover with great difficulty. The young and more tender sheep are killed by a small portion, but the elder ones can bear a stronger dose. Yet this food will likewise prove mortal to them, if they

take too much of it: the same noxious effect it shows in regard to calves which eat too much of the leaves: they either die, or do not recover easily. I can remember, that in the autumn of the year 1748, some calves eat of the leaves, but fell very sick, swelled, foamed at the mouth, and could hardly stand; however, they were cured by giving them gunpowder and other medicines: the sheep are most exposed to be tempted by these leaves in winter; for after having been kept in stables, for some months they are greedy of all greens, especially if the snow still lies upon the fields, and therefore the green but poisonous leaves of the *Kalmia* are to them very tempting. Horses, oxen and cows which have eaten them have likewise been very ill after the meal, and though none of them ever died of eating these leaves, yet most people believed that if they took too great a portion of them, death would certainly be the result. For it has been observed that when these animals only eat small quantities, yet they suffer great pains. On the other hand, the leaves of the *Kalmia* are the food of stags, when the snow covers the ground, and hides all other provisions from them. Therefore, if they be shot

in winter, their bowels are found filled with these leaves; and it is very extraordinary that if those bowels are given to dogs, they become quite stupid and as it were drunk, and often fall so sick that they seem to be at the point of death, but the people, who have eaten the venison, have not felt the least indisposition. The leaves of the *Kalmia* are likewise the winter food of those birds, which the *Swedes* in *North America* call *Hazel-hens*, and which stay here all winter, for when they are killed, their crop is found quite filled with them.

The wood of the *Kalmia* is very hard, and some people, on that account, make the axis of their pullies of it. Weavers' shuttles are chiefly made of it, and the weavers are of opinion that no wood in this country is better for this purpose, for it is compact, may be made very smooth, and does not easily crack, or burst. The joiners and turners here employ it in making all kinds of work, which requires the best wood; they chiefly use the root because it is quite yellow; the wood has a very suitable hardness and fineness, and from the center, spread as it were small rays, which are at some distance from each other. When the leaves of the *Kal-*

mia are thrown into the fire, they make a crackling like salt. The chimney sweepers make brooms in winter of the branches with the leaves on them, since they cannot get others in that season. In the summer of the year 1750, a certain kind of worms devoured the leaves of almost all the trees in *Pennsylvania*: yet they did not venture to attack the leaves of the *Kalmia*. Some people asserted that when a fire happened in the woods, it never went further, as soon as it came to the *Kalmias*, or *Spoon trees*.

The Dwarf Laurel

MAY the 28th, 1749. The *Magnolia glauca* was now in full bloom. Its flowers have a very pleasant fragrant, which refreshes the travellers in the woods, especially towards the evening. The flowers of the wild vine afterwards supplied the place of those of the *Magnolia*. Several other flowers contribute likewise towards perfuming the ambient air.

The *Kalmia angustifolia* was now everywhere in flower. It grows chiefly on sandy heaths, or on dry, poor grounds, which few other plants will agree with; it is common in *Pennsylvania*, but particularly in *New Jersey*, and the province of *New York*, it is

scarce in *Canada*; its leaves stay in winter; the flowers are a real ornament to the woods; they grow in bunches like crowns, and are of a fine lively purple colour; at the bottom is a circle of deep purple, and within it a greyish or whitish colour. The flowers grow as aforesaid, in bunches, round the extremity of the stalk, and make it look like a decorated pyramid. The *English* at *New York* call this plant the *Dwarf Laurel*. Its qualities are the same with those of the *Kalmia latifolia*, viz. that it kills sheep and other lesser animals, when they eat plentifully of it. I do not know whether it is noxious to the greater cattle. It is not of any known use, and only serves to attract the eye whilst in flower.

The *Kalmia latifolia* was likewise in full bloom at present. It rivals the preceding one, in the beauty of its colour; yet though they are conspicuous in regard to the colours and shape of their flowers, they are no ways remarkable for smell, such as the *Magnolia* is; for they have little or no smell at all. So equally and justly does nature distribute her gifts; no part of the creation has them all, each has its own, and none is absolutely without a share of them.

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Country's Dialects Recorded For Study

Philology

THE dry New England manner of speech, the southern drawl, Pennsylvania Dutch rising inflections, the Western twang—we pick them out by ear as we hear Americans talk. But now, two professors at Columbia University are collecting American dialects and making a careful scientific analysis of subtle differences. The New Englander of the sea, for example, has a different way of using tongue and lips in his speech from the New Englander of the hills.

More than 200 phonograph records, including 50 speeches by famous people, have been collected by Prof. Harry M. Ayres and Prof. W. Cabell Greet. Their library contains what would appear to be a strange collection of literature, 150 copies of the same story, "Grip the Rat," but every copy of the story is spoken by a different American voice. They have been aided in collecting varieties of American speech by the fact that the 14,000 summer school students at the university have a convenient custom

of gathering beneath trees named for their states. Here, on the campus, can be picked out and sorted plenty of dialects, pure and mixed.

In a progress report to the journal, *American Speech*, the two professors point out that education does not completely eradicate local speech peculiarities. Students reproduce local traits to a surprising degree, they have found. The terror of the microphone proves an aid in scaring artificial mannerisms out of most students who have added their voices to the collections.

The report goes into detail regarding differences in specific vowels and consonants in various parts of the United States and Canada. The typical New Englander of the coast speaks with a sharp attack and brisk utterance. The vowel a, which is one of the letters that has a vivid and changeable personality on the American tongue, is most typically New England in asked, aunt, and can't where the tone is placed far front. In barn, the a is located slightly

farther back, and the professors explain that in no case is this sound as far back as in the ordinary American pronunciation of father.

The mountain New Englander has "a slow elegaic cast in his speech tone, a certain doubt as to the advisability of proceeding, coupled with a resigned acceptance of the necessity of doing so," the report graphically explains. The a sound in this region is shorter than in the speech of the sea coast.

This example of contrast indicates the analytic method of the study, which goes into much detail and uses many technical terms such as fronting, cupping, and vowel gliding, to describe the sounds Americans make when they talk.

Records of the various speech types of a single community, Williamsburg, Virginia, were this summer gathered under the direction of Prof. Greet and should yield interesting results, Prof. Ayres stated.

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