



I had to go to England!!!

Yes, I had to go to the UK to be enlightened about a plant that grew in my own backyard. In my defense, I was so much younger then and much less enlightened. But here's the short of it. In 1992, my friend, Dan Heims, and I spent two solid weeks travelling around the UK visiting gardens, plant collections, and friends. It was a plantsman's dream trip starting off with two nights as the guests of Agatha Christie's daughter, a day with Beth Chatto, a day with Elizabeth Strangman, and many other legends of British gardening and culminating with a full day, sun up to sun down, of Dan and I strolling around Wisley with Graham Stuart Thomas just the three of us. (I'd use a few exclamation points here, but I've been told that I use too many!)

It was on that trip to England, a gardener's Nirvana, that a chance drive through the Devon countryside on the way to visit yet another National Council for the Conservation of Plants & Gardens collection brought us by a lovely cottage garden. There was a border along the front of the property of what I first thought was some rare Hydrangea species. Now, in the UK, it's not uncommon for fellow gardeners to stop at a stranger's garden and strike up a conversation, so I wasn't surprised when Dan slammed on the brakes again and backed up into yet another person's driveway. The woman was delighted to have a couple of fellow plant geeks

from across the pond admire her plantings and welcomed us into her home and garden. She laughed heartily when I explained to her what initially caught my attention.

Before I could query her as to what the magnificent planting was, she said "That's one of yours."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That's your False Solomons Seal, *Smilacina racemosa*," she replied.

To avoid further embarrassment on my part for not knowing, I quickly complimented her on her exquisite choice of plant material. So, there you have it! Here was a plant that I'd encountered in the woods behind my home on many occasions and knew quite well, but never realized that if you give it a home in a garden, free from competition with tree roots, weeds, rocks etc and a little TLC, it performs tenfold!!!

Now, about the name of this plant, which by the way is native to every state in the US and all of Canada. Here's where it gets kinda sticky. As a child, I always knew this plant as False Solomons Seal. As I grew up and started speaking Latin, it became *Smilacina racemosa* to me. The true Solomon's Seal being any one of a number of species in the genus *Polygonatum*. Now, I come to find that not only have the taxonomists changed the name to



Maianthemum racemosum but, I've even heard rumors that it was being moved from the Liliaceae family to the Convallariaceae family.

Nevertheless, and with due respect to all the name changes etc, this long lived, easy to grow, almost shrub-like in appearance perennial plant will bring you, your friends, and your visitors decades of pleasure in your garden. It typically grows in average soil in all types of light conditions from deep shade to filtered sunlight. The deep green, glossy, arching foliage is persistent all the growing season long and the attractive, long lasting, elegant feathery, creamy white blooms light up the whole garden in early- to mid-spring. Average height is 12-18", but I've seen mature, well-fed plantings attain heights of almost 60".

And if that weren't enough, it's fragrant! And wait till you see the berries it produces in autumn!!!

Propagation is also quite easy as it forms a new bud along the rhizome every year and can even be easily grown from seed, although it takes several years to reach flowering size from seedlings. As far as the deer and other critters go, they may occasionally take a nip at it, but it's not on their delicacy list and they pretty much ignore it. There seems to be no insect, pest, or disease problems. In fact, I've never even observed an aphid on it. 🌿

Barry Glick, the self-proclaimed "King of Helleborus," grew up in Philadelphia in the '60s, a mecca of horticulture. Barry cut high school classes to hitchhike to Longwood Gardens before he was old enough to drive.

In 1972, he realized there was just not enough room for him and his plants in the big-city environment, so he bought

60 acres on a mountaintop in Greenbrier County, WV, where he gave birth to Sunshine Farm & Gardens (www.sunfarm.com), a mail-order plant nursery.

Barry grows more than 10,000 different plants and specializes in native plants and hellebores. He can be reached at 304.497.2208 or barry@sunfarm.com.

Photos courtesy of Ian Cooke.