In Nature’s Garden

Coral-Honeysuckle

BY ELIZABETH MURRAY

My mother is an experienced and skilful gardener, and when she asked to weed for me on her first visit from England, I readily assented. At the end of the morning, she came happily in to lunch. “I’ve cleared all around that lovely honeysuckle and really left it room to breathe,” she announced proudly. I groaned sadly, for the only honeysuckle in my yard is Lonicera japonica, the infamous Japanese honeysuckle. Misguidedly introduced from Japan as an ornamental many years ago, it is now one of our worst pests, shading and strangling native vegetation, spreading everywhere and only very occasionally justified by its fragrant flowers.

Had my mother found in my yard her own native English honeysuckle, Lonicera periclymenum, with its huge sweet-smelling flowers and tractable growth habits, I should have been content. But this species is only found on this continent as an escape from cultivation in the far north-east. And if it had been our own native coral-honeysuckle, I should have been delighted. Lonicera sempervirens is a beautiful vine with smooth, twining stems, shiny, opposite, evergreen leaves and brilliant, coral-colored, trumpet-shaped flowers up to two inches long. There are five lobes to the corolla, and five yellow stamens inserted on the tube and projecting a little way beyond it. The flower blooms in early to mid-summer.

Although I do not have coral-honeysuckle in my yard, it does occur in the Piedmont, and also in the Coastal Plain, growing in clearings and along the edges of deciduous woods, often in quite damp habitats. I first saw it along one of the tracks that leads into Lake Drummond in the Dismal Swamp.

Honeysuckles belong in the Caprifoliaceae, a family that includes the viburnums, elders, twinflower and snowberry. All members of the family have opposite leaves and many of them are shrubs or vines, mainly inhabiting the temperate regions of the world. There are more than a dozen species of native honeysuckle in the east of America in addition to several hybrids and other species which have been introduced from Europe and Asia and become naturalized.

In New England, the berries of the swamp fly-honeysuckle, Lonicera villosa, can be eaten when they ripen to a dark blue rather early in the summer for berries (before blueberries). And although it is hard to make a large meal from honeysuckle, I have always been in the habit of picking any piece of blooming Lonicera and sucking it for the nectar at the base of the flowers.

It seems a pity that the menace of the Japanese honeysuckle has given the group such a bad name. For nearly all honeysuckles have attractive flowers, and the coral-honeysuckle is the most brilliant of them.

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