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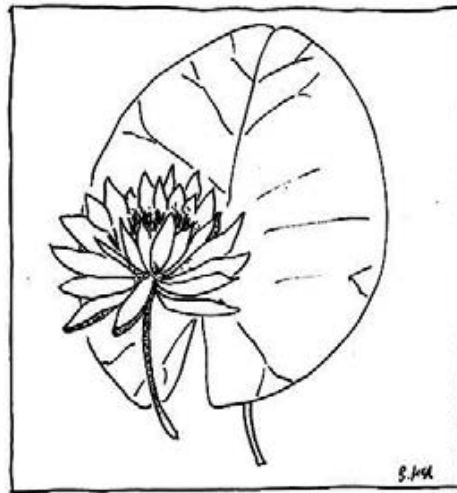


Sweet Water Lilies, Our Lotus Blossoms

When the morning sun reaches the big white buds of this floating blossom, the petals open and anyone nearby will recognize the remarkable sweet scent of the sunny morning. Writing in 1852, Thoreau called these lilies “our lotus, queen of the waters, a superb flower.” They are blooming now, easy to spot on still waters, surrounded by their big round lily-pad leaves which can be ten inches across. Last month in the *Monterey News*, Mary Kate Jordan quoted a centuries-old saying: “no mud, no lotus.” Thoreau points out the same balance in his journal entry of June, 1852: “How sweet, innocent wholesome its fragrance! How pure its white petals, though its root is in the mud!”

Thoreau goes further, recalling that many times he has seen young men on their way to church, having just bathed. I know from reading Thoreau that “bathing” means going for a swim. He says these young men, “...having bathed, will walk slowly and soberly to church in their best clothes, each with a lily in his hand or bosom—as long a stem as he could get. At least I used to see them go into church smelling a pond lily, when I used to go myself so that flower is to some extent associated with bathing in Sabbath mornings and going to church, its odor contrasting and atoning for that of the sermon.”

The big, fancy, white blossoms float right on the surface, open wide. Then they close up by noon or early afternoon. Many kinds of flowers put out their energies in the morning, in the interest of catching a breeze for distributing pollen,



or for luring an insect for the same thing. The bright white petal color against dark lily-pad leaves makes it easy for an insect to find the blossom, once the fabulous scent has brought it to the general neighborhood. Just to make sure the insect is guided to the important center of the flower, this part is a lovely golden yellow, in contrast. Many flowers have various sorts of running lines to the center, in pink or red, to guide the small aircraft in. Water lilies use scent, color, location, and other elements too subtle for Thoreau or for me but just right for the pollinators.

The water lilies are called alligator blankets in South Carolina and alligator bonnets in Louisiana. In Texas they are water queens, or toad lilies. The leaves are leathery dark green on top, and striking red or purple underneath. This underside is home base to a whole community of small creatures. Many beetles lay their eggs there, and the larvae hatch out in this upside-down nursery, as do snails and caddisflies. There are fresh-water sponges here, adult snails, and animals called bryozoans which live in colonies. These are also called moss-animals, and

make gelatinous group homes that look something like the masses containing frog or salamander eggs.

Once you know the name or names of a thing, you can look it up in books old or new. I have one I like from 1900. This writer calls the water lily the “sumptuous queen of our native aquatic plants, of the royal family to which the gigantic *Victoria regia* of Brazil belongs.” She goes on: “In Egypt, India, China, Japan, Persia, and Asiatic Russia, how many millions have bent their heads in adoration of her relative, the sacred lotus! From its center Brahma came forth: Buddha, too, whose symbol is the lotus, first appeared floating on the mystic flower.” (Neltje Blanchan, writing in “Nature’s Garden,” a volume of *The New Nature Library* from Doubleday, Page & Company.)

An 1892 writer on medicinal plants tells us that all parts of the water lily are edible and “the roots, in decoction, were much esteemed” by Native Americans for all sorts of ills. If you decoct something, you boil it down, or steep it in hot water.

Walk out by a beaver pond, a swamp, or get in your canoe and look around the edges of Lake Garfield or Brewer Pond. In these clean, clear places where no herbicides have been applied, the water lilies bloom from June to October, reminding us we have water queens right here. Like so many good things, they are rooted in rich and glorious mud. It’s not long ago that we land creatures crawled ashore ourselves, from that primordial ooze. Like the young men of Thoreau’s Concord, we should remember to take our Sabbath bath, emerge like them ready to balance the most difficult of sermons with help from the water queen, our gorgeous toad lily. — Bonner McAllester