

READING 19-5

Source: Pliny's Natural History, Bostock, J. and H.T. Riley. 1855. Complete in 5 volumes, Bohn, London

Pliny

Chap. 22. p. 477. Book XVII. Vol. 3. Grafting: The First Discovery of it

Nature has also taught us the art of grafting by means of seed. We see a seed swallowed whole by a famished bird; when softened by the natural heat of the crop, it is voided, with the fecundating juices of the dung, upon some soft couch formed by a tree; or else, as is often the case, is carried by the winds to some cleft in the bark of a tree. Hence it is that we see the cherry growing upon the willow, the plane upon the laurel, the laurel upon the cherry, and fruits of various tints and hues all springing from the same tree at once. It is said, too, that the jack-daw, from its concealment of the seeds of plants in holes which serve at its store-houses, gives rise to a similar result.

Chap. 23. p. 477. Book XVII. Vol. 3. Inoculation or Budding

In this, too, the art of inoculating took its rise. By the aid of an instrument similar to a shoe-maker's paring-knife an eye is opened in a tree by paring away the bark, and another bud is then enclosed in it, that has been previously removed with the same instrument from another tree. This was the ancient mode of inoculation with the fig and the apple. That again, described by Virgil, requires a slight fissure to be made in the knot of a bud which has burst through the bark, and in this is enclosed a bud taken from another tree. Thus far has Nature been our instructor in these matters.

Chap. 44. p. 530. Book XVII. Vol. 3. Caprification, and Particulars Connected with the Fig

It is beyond all doubt that in caprification the green fruit gives birth to a kind of gnat; for when they have taken flight, there are no seeds to be found within the fruit; from this it would appear that the seeds have been transformed into these gnats. Indeed, these insects are so eager to take their flight, that they mostly leave behind them either a leg or a part of a wing on their departure. There is another species of gnat, too, that grows in the fig, which in its indolence and malignity strongly resembles the drone of the beehive, and shows itself a deadly enemy to the one that is of real utility; it is called *centrina*, and in killing the others it meets its own death.

Moths, too attach the seeds of the fig: the best plan of getting rid of them, is to bury a slip of mastich, turned upside down, in the same trench, The fig, too, is rendered extremely productive by soaking red earth in amurca, and laying it, with some manure, upon the roots of the tree, just as it is beginning to throw out leaves, Among the wild figs, the black ones, and those which grow in rocky places, are the most esteemed, from the fact of the fruit containing the most seed. Caprification takes place most advantageously just after rain.

Chap. 45. p. 531. Book XVII. Vol. 3. Errors That May Be Committed In Pruning

But, before everything, especial care should be taken that intended remedies are not productive of ill results; as these may arise from either remedial measures being applied in excess or at unseasonable times. Clearing away the branches is of the greatest benefit to trees, but to slaughter them this way every year, is productive of the very worst results. The vine is the only tree that requires lopping every year, the myrtle, the pomegranate, and olive every other; the reason being that these trees shoot with great rapidity. The other trees are lopped less frequently, and none of them in autumn; the trunk even is never scraped, except in spring. In pruning a tree, all that is removed beyond what is absolutely necessary, is so much withdrawn from its vitality.

Chap. 49. p. 250. Book XX. Vol. 4. Rocket: Twelve Remedies

The seed of rocket is remedial for the venom of the scorpion and the shrew-mouse: it repels, too, all parasitical insects which breed on the human body, and applied to the face, as a liniment, with honey, removes 40 spots upon the skin. Used with vinegar, too, it is a cure for freckles; and mixed with ox-gall it restores the livid marks left by wounds to their natural colour. It is said that if this plant is taken in wine by persons who are about to undergo a flogging, it will impart a certain degree of insensibility to the body. So agreeable is its flavour as a savouring for food, that the Greeks have given it the name of "euzomon." It is generally thought that rocket, lightly bruised, and employed as a fomentation for the eyes, will restore the sight to its original goodness, and that it allays coughs in young infants. The root of it, boiled in water, has the property of extracting the splinters of broken bones.

As to the properties of rocket as an aphrodisiac, we have mentioned them already. Three leaves of wild rocket plucked with the left hand, beaten up in hydromel, and then taken in drink, are productive of a similar effect.

Chap. 23. p. 156–158. Book XIX. Vol. 4. Vegetables of a Cartilaginous Nature-Cucumis

The cucumis belongs to the cartilaginous class of plants, and grows above the ground. It was a wonderful favourite with the Emperor Tiberius, and, indeed, he was never without it; for he had raised beds made in frames upon wheels, by means of which the cucumis were moved and exposed to the full heat of the sun; while, in winter, they were withdrawn, and placed under the protection of frames glazed with mirrorstone. We find it stated, also, by the ancient Greek writers, that the cucumis ought to be propagated from seed that has been steeped a couple of days in milk and honey, this method having the effect of rendering them all the sweeter to the taste. The cucumis, while growing, may be trained to take any form that may be wished: in Italy the cucumis are green and very small, while those grown in some of the provinces are remarkably large, and of a wax colour or black. Those of Africa, which are also remarkably prolific, are held in high esteem; the same, too, with the cucumis of Moesia, which are by far the largest of all. When the cucumis acquires a very considerable volume, it is known to us as the "pepo." Cucumis when eaten remain on the stomach till the following day, and are very difficult of digestion; still, for all that, in general they are not considered very unwholesome. By nature they have a wonderful hatred to oil, and no less affection for water, and this after they have been out from the stem even. If water is within a moderate distance of them, they will creep towards it, while from oil, on the other hand, they will shrink away: if any obstacle, too, should happen to arrest their progress, or if they are left to hang, they will grow curved and crooked. Of these facts we may be satisfactorily convinced in a single night even, for if a vessel filled with water is placed at four fingers distance from a cucumis, it will be found to have descended to it by the following morning; but if the same is done with oil, it will have assumed the curved form of a hook by the next day. It hung in a tube while in blossom, the cucumis will grow to a most surprising length. It is only of late, too, that a cucumis of entirely new shape has been produced in Campania, it having just the form of a quince. It was quite by accident, I am told, that the first one acquired this shape in growing, and it was from the seed of this that all the others have been reproduced. The name given to this variety is "melopepo." These last do not grow hanging, but assume their round shape as they lie on the ground. A thing that is very remarkable in them, in addition to their shape, colour, and smell, is the fact that, when ripe, although they do not hang from the stem, they separate from it at the stalk.

Columella has given us a plan of his, by which we may have cucumis the whole year round: the largest bramblebush that can be procured is transplanted to a warm, sunny spot, and then cut down, about the time of the vernal equinox, to within a couple of fingers of the ground; a cucumis-seed is then inserted in the pith of the bramble, and the roots are well moulded up with fine earth and manure, to withstand the cold. According to the Greeks, there are three kinds of cucumis, the Laconian, the Scytalic, and the Boeotian, the Laconian being the only one among them that is fond of the water.

There are some persons who recommend steeping the seed of the cucumis in the juice of the herb known as the "culix;" the produce, they say, will be sure to grow without seeds.