



It Takes a Village

by

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If the title of this essay sounds familiar, then you are probably familiar with the old African proverb that “it takes a village to raise a child.” This proverb, which also provided the inspiration for Hillary Rodham Clinton’s book of the same name, acknowledges the contributions of individuals who provide parental support and complement parental expertise. This proverb is also applicable to situations other than child rearing. For example, I recently found a plant in the St. John’s Arboretum that I could not identify. This is the story about the “villagers” who came to my aid.

In early October, while walking on the chapel trail near the statue of St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks (*see image*), I spied an interesting shrub growing in the understory of the towering conifers that comprise Minnesota’s oldest pine plantation. The plant was about five feet tall with open branching giving it a rather scraggly appearance. The leaves were dark green, slightly glossy, had smooth margins, and were attached individually on the stem (alternate leaf arrangement). The bush was covered with black, berry-like fruits that each had a star-shaped groove

in the bottom (*see image*). I saw at least one other individual growing nearby.

Based on the appearance of the bark, leaves, and fruit, I was reasonably confident that the shrub was a member of the Rose Family (Rosaceae). But it didn’t match any of the likely candidates including juneberry (*Amelanchier* sp.) or one of the cherries or plums (*Prunus* sp.) that grow wild in the Arboretum. Like a parent in an African village, I needed some help. So, I grabbed a specimen of the plant and headed straight to the Arboretum office seeking some expert advice from one of the staff members.



Figure 1. Statue of St. Kateri Tekawitha in the Saint John’s Arboretum

When I arrived, I peeked into the main office and was pleased to find Dan Vogel, a master woodsman who knows his trees and shrubs. Dan would surely be able to identify the mystery plant. I handed him the sample. Dan carefully scrutinized it for a minute or so before he finally said, “I’m not sure, but it looks like *Aronia*.” I nodded in agreement, feeling a little

sheepish that I hadn’t thought of black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*), a plant in

the Rose family with which I’m familiar.

We chatted for a short while about the virtues of black chokeberry. For example, did you know that

although the berries are too astringent to eat fresh (hence the common name), the juice reportedly makes a decent jelly and is sometimes used to as a natural food coloring? After our conversation, I thanked Dan for his assistance and walked back to my office, all the while examining the specimen. Although I agreed with Dan that it looked “similar” to black chokeberry, I wasn’t convinced that it actually “was” black chokeberry; I was nearly certain that black chokeberry had toothed leaf margins. When I got back to my office, I scoured my books and internet sites for images and descriptions of black chokeberry and they all matched the mystery plant reasonably well – except for the leaf margins which as I suspected should be toothed. But, the fruit was nearly identical so I convinced myself that Dan must be correct.

A few weeks later, I was pleasantly surprised when Dan stopped by my office. With a big smile, he asked if I remembered the black chokeberry. “Of course,” I responded, and then I showed him the herbarium specimen

that I had prepared from the plant (**Fig. 2**).

Dan went on to explain that he had just run into John Elton, St John’s master gardener, who was planting hedge cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster lucidus*) near the new Abbey Guesthouse. “The shrubs that John was planting looked very familiar,” Dan said, “and then I realized that they were the same as the one you found. That’s our mystery plant.” A quick check showed that hedge cotoneaster was, indeed, a perfect match! Case closed.

Hedge cotoneaster is a widely planted landscape shrub that is hardy to zone 3. Woody plant expert Michael Dirr reports that it is a common, and in his

opinion overused, hedge plant on college campuses in the Midwest. Hedge cotoneaster is not native to Minnesota but is introduced from Siberia and parts of northern Asia. Dirr also notes that it was cultivated as early as 1840.

Now that Dan, with some fortuitous assistance by John, has identified the mystery plant, one question remains – how did it get there? One hypothesis is that it may have escaped from cultivation. Perhaps a bird dropped a seed from a campus hedge. In its native range, hedge cotoneaster can be very invasive. However, it does not appear to be a

significant pest in the US. In fact, I only found one record of it growing outside of cultivation, and this was a specimen collected near Milwaukee (University of Wisconsin Herbarium & USDA Plants web sites).

As of 1991, the plant was not reported growing wild in Minnesota (J Ownbey & T

Morley, Vascular Plants of Minnesota), but it

has subsequently been reported in the state by botanists associated with the University of Minnesota–Duluth Herbarium. Despite the fact that it can escape cultivation in Minnesota, my hunch is that an industrious monk planted it in its current location years ago to beautify the trail to the chapel. This hypothesis is reasonable because there is at least one other out-of-place cultivated plant growing in the area; someone clearly planted mock orange (*Philadelphus coronarius*), another typically cultivated shrub, not too far from St. Kateri, near the grotto at the southern end of the point.



Figure 2. Herbarium specimen of *Cotoneaster lucidus*

Regardless of how hedge cotoneaster came to grow in the Arboretum, we are lucky at St. John's/St. Ben's to have a group of friendly and skilled plant lovers like Dan Vogel and John Elton who are willing to tackle a botanical mystery. That's because it sometimes takes a village of botanists to identify a plant.

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