

## **Apples, Chestnuts and Bob Harris-san.**

by Conrad Vispo.

It is probably no coincidence that our 'holiday season' falls at this time of year. Generations ago, when most people were farmers, few would have participated in a mid-summer, multi-day revelry – there was too much to do during the growing season. Winter was different. There was wood to be cut and manure hauled but, for the most part, crops had been harvested and many cattle slaughtered. There may have been uncertainty about winter provisions and the fruits of the upcoming growing season, but one season had largely been closed and another was yet to begin.

This heritage persists in our culture today. We tend to assume that the rest of nature follows a similar schedule, closing off one year and contemplating the next through dormant seeds, sleeping eggs, and hibernating creatures. Of course, the busy squirrels and fluffed-up birds at our feeders testify that all is not asleep, but, nonetheless, were we to punctuate the year, winter is as close as we would get to a period. But nose around and one finds that, far from being a full stop, this is the taciturn teenager time of the year when quiet masks grand preparations for seasons yet to come.

This was brought home to me when, last Autumn, I sought out the 2014 apple crop. It was almost non-existent in wild trees and severely reduced in organic orchards. That meager harvest was presaged by the apple 'boom' of 2013, when trees sagged beneath the crop's weight. During that year, the apple trees not only spent their savings but also 'borrowed' from this year's harvest. As orchardists know (and act upon via thinning), the key to having a decent crop in any given year is to not let your trees over do it in the preceding year. Were one skilled enough, one could probably take some dendrological pulse and then accurately predict the apple harvest of a year hence. In other words, barring extremes of weather, disease or the like, the 2015 crop is already 'in the cards'.

This is hardly the realm of cultivated plants alone. Inspect Red Oak twigs in mid-winter, and you will find the tiny acorns that presage next year's crop. Anybody who did this in late 2013 would have seen the heralds of the stupendous Red Oak acorn crop we've just experienced. Pause by a Red Maple, and you will see that the twigs are often dotted not by spent remains but by the bulging flower buds of next April. Likewise, Alder and Birch are decked not only with 'pepper shakers' dispersing last Autumn's seeds, but also with catkins which will bloom in the upcoming Spring.

Appreciating such cross-year components of our seasons doesn't come naturally to us, given the more compartmentalized seasonality of our own culture. It takes additional effort to conceive of these unfamiliar rhythms. One might call such instances, when nature's patterns require extra concentration to comprehend because they diverge from our expectations, the 'Bob Harris' effect, in honor of the baffled character played by Bill Murray in the movie, *Lost in Translation*. Bob Harris is an American translocated to Japan for business, where he is a fish out of water; his cultural preconceptions mean that he is largely at a loss to navigate Japanese culture. Although part of Nature, human culture is, like

American culture in the movie, hardly the whole picture. Nature knows other perspectives beside our own.

There are other examples of the 'Bob Harris' effect. The mere duration of change was mentioned in previous columns – we have difficulty comprehending change on time frames greater than our own generations. Or take forest dynamics. A couple of days after Christmas, during some rare sunshine, we trooped up Harvey Mountain. Coming down, we passed through an interesting forest, where multi-trunked Oaks shared the ground with a thicket of Beech. Less conspicuous, but clearly evident once you focused on them, was a scattering of dead tree trunks, usually the diameter of large flag poles, surrounded by clusters of live shoots – the modern architecture of American Chestnut. The northerly Hobblebush hovered closer to the uneven ground. We don't regularly stumble across this constellation of species.

Faced with this interesting mix, the most obvious question is 'what is it about this site and the ecologies of these species that produces such a forest?' That question is rife with the 'Bob Harris' effect. Specifically, it implies that the current botany of the site is the nearly-mathematical result of overlaying a set of fixed botanical personalities on a particular physical landscape. This reflects our prevailing cultural logic – result Y (e.g., car doesn't start) is the immediate result of preceding event X (e.g., headlights left on).

Nature is probably more coy. Rather than being a cut and dried result, that forest is a snapshot from an endless story of change. Rather than looking at "C" in "A + B = C", we are looking at the "+", looking at the on-going processes that integrate various causes. Those multi-trunk Oaks likely reflect past logging; those flag-pole sized snags might tell us of mature Chestnuts that, before the Blight, once grew nearby; that Beech thicket may reflect a mix of enthusiasm for the sunlight let in by logging and by the Chestnut Blight, coupled with the stunting of yet another forest epidemic, Beech-bark Disease; that Hobblebush hints at a lack of ploughing. This cascade of 'causes' – the Chestnut Blight, the logging, the Beech Bark disease (and surely others) – mean that we are watching the course of a sailboat buffeted by various winds, or, better, of sailboats buffeted not only by various winds but also interacting with each other, colliding, blocking wind, slip-streaming, all with a time delay (due to the often relatively slow growth of woody plants) that means boats may currently be tacking relative to a by-gone wind. We have hardly reached some predictable endpoint; instead, we are mid-stream, where knowledge, if anything, brings more questions: will those Chestnuts persist or even expand? Will Beech fade from the canopy and become a shrub of sorts? Will the Hobblebush be discouraged by climate warming? The complexity doesn't mean we shouldn't search for understanding, but we should seek processes rather than final results.

As we survey the 'quiet season' from the other side of the holiday hubbub, the apple and the forests proclaim, in a voice muted by the 'Bob Harris' effect, that Nature does not rest. One season is linked to another, one decade to the next, in ways that are discouraging to those of us banking on predictability, but which also beg observation and promise the sparkle of the unexpected and of discovery for the new year.