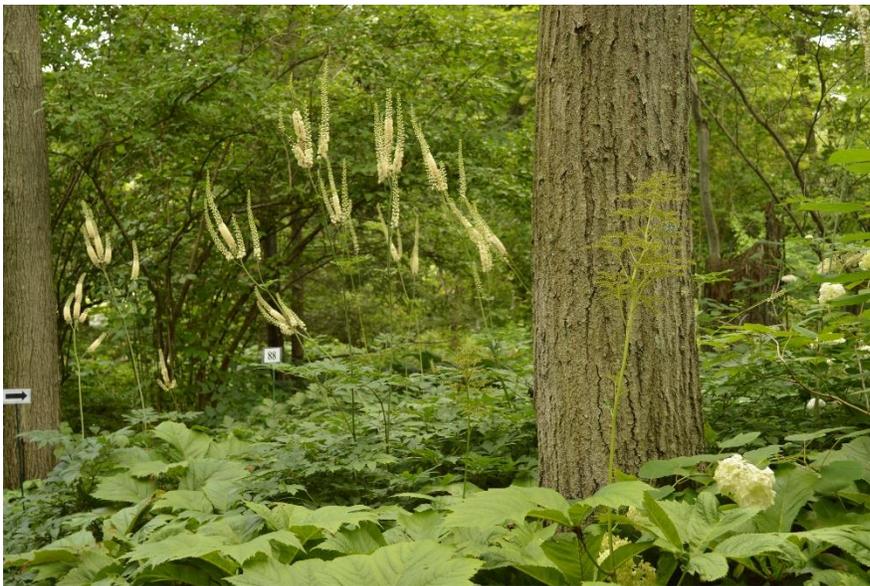


Bugbane - A Plant of Great Depth

I find it interesting how we often see attractive native plants in gardens before we see them in the wild! I first saw Bugbane, botanically known as *Actaea* (formerly *Cimicifuga*) *racemosa* at the home and garden of Fred and Mary Ann McGourty. Fred had been the editor for the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's informative Handbook Series and specialized in perennials, ultimately publishing a book entitled "The Perennial Gardener". Most of his knowledge came from the garden he and Mary Ann developed at their home, which they named Hillside Gardens. With a touch of genius, they had sited a number of Bugbane plants such that you could view a small piece of statuary through the slender 6-8' tall floral stems. It created a wonderful feeling of depth and a lifelong appreciation for how best to use this elegant plant!

Bugbane is in the Buttercup Family or Ranunculaceae and has 12-18 species found throughout temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere. *Actaea racemosa* is native from southern Ontario to Georgia and west to Missouri and Arkansas, where it is typically found in woodlands



and shaded rocky slopes. The botanical name of the plant has certainly endured its share of change over the years and remains a point of contention with some to this day. The original genus name of *Actaea* was assigned to this plant in 1753 by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). Linnaeus was most likely struck by the similarity of the

foliage of Bugbane to that of the shrub Elderberry. Recognizing that Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) had named Elderberry *Aktea*, he simply adopted the name for Bugbane. However, in 1818 the British botanist and zoologist Thomas Nuttall (1786-1859) changed the plants' classification to the genus *Cimicifuga*. Nuttall studied the vegetation in North America from 1810-1841, only returning to Britain once during the war of 1812. He altered the name based on how the seed develops in dry follicles rather than in fleshy fruits typical of *Actaea*. Interestingly, the name *Cimicifuga* was actually crafted by Linnaeus in 1753, although it was not properly published until 1763 through the efforts of the Austrian botanist Johann Jacob Wernischek (1743-1804). The name comes from the Latin *Cīmex* for 'bug' and *Fugae* for avoid or drive away, based upon the supposed ability of the plant to repel insects. The insect repelling trait also led to the common name of Bugbane. The plant remained under *Cimicifuga* until the late 1990's when genetic analysis determined it was more closely aligned with *Actaea* and the original genus name was reassigned. However, confusion still reigns as some authorities feel the difference in the seed-bearing structures are sufficient for the name to remain as *Cimicifuga*. The species epithet

reflects the flower structure, with the flowers appearing along an unbranched stem called a raceme. Other common names include Black Snakeroot, which is based upon the shape of the dark brown rhizome and Black Cohosh. Cohosh is an Algonquin term for rough, which again describes the appearance of the dark rhizome.

As the historical reference to Elderberry alludes, the foliage of Bugbane is very lacy in appearance, with each leaf divided 3 individual times, termed tripinnate as seen at right. As the leaves initially emerge, they are often edged in purple or have a dark purple cast to the entire leaf, which transitions to a dark green as the leaf unfurls. Each 'leaf' can reach 3' across and up to 2' wide. The crown of each plant develops a number of leaves, which curve



outward as they near their 2'+ height. This allows the leaves to be nearly parallel to the ground and best able to capture the sunlight as it hits the forest floor. Ultimately, all the foliage combined creates a very neat and tidy appearing plant with a more or less flat top. Come June into July the slender flower stems extend upwards through the foliage. The flower stems



typically grow to 5-6' tall, although they can be shorter or taller, depending upon the soil fertility and moisture. They terminate in one to three racemes, with each raceme upwards of 12-18" long and initially sporting 55-110 gleaming white buds arranged radially around the stem (as seen at left). The buds gradually open from the base upwards, with each bud yielding close to 60 white male stamens surrounding a central white stigma. Each individual flower is $\frac{3}{8}$ -

$\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter and although there are no showy petals or leafy calyces, the flowers are still amazingly attractive! In the shaded woodland or at dusk, they appear like candles atop tall wands, providing another common name of Fairy Candles. They bear an attractive sweet fragrance with subtle acrid undertones that serves to attract a bevy of pollinators, including bees, flies, beetles and ants. Although the plant may have the reputation for repelling insects, there is certainly no shortage of pollinators who come to dine on the pollen. The plants slowly spread via the thick rhizomes as well as through seeding, allowing large colonies to develop over time.

Ideally, plants prefer filtered sunlight beneath a tall tree canopy in soils that are rich in organic matter and are not prone to becoming droughty. However, Bugbane can easily grow in bright light or morning sun. At Hillside Gardens, the plants were happily growing in rather moist soils where it received morning sun, although I have seen large populations blooming equally as well in dense Oak forests along rocky hillsides. The plants are certainly hardy throughout NJ, naturally growing in zones 3-8.

During one particular visit to Hillside Gardens, Fred was talking with great enthusiasm about a new seedling of the Asian species *Actaea simplex* he had collected with the deepest, dark purple foliage he had yet to see. He named it 'Hillside Black Beauty' and indeed, it remains one of the best dark purple forms. This

species was originally named in 1824 as *Actaea cimicifuga* var. *simplex* by the Swiss botanist Augustin Pyramus de Candolle (1778-1841). It was reclassified as *Cimicifuga simplex* in 1842, by the Danish botanist Morten Wormskjold (1783-1845), although like Linnaeus before him, he too failed to correctly publish the name. It was not until 1888 that the German botanist Karl Anton Eugen Prantl (1849-1893) properly described the



plant. *Actaea simplex* is a smaller plant than its North American cousin, with the foliage reaching upwards of 2' tall and the flowers a more demure 3-5' tall. The foliage is once again divided three times, and the species epithet of *simplex* refers to the simple, unbranched nature of the flower stem or perhaps a leaflet. The flowers appear later as well, with the white wands growing to 8" long and not opening until mid to late August. 'Hillside Black Beauty' is a member of the *Atropurpurea* Group, which feature various shades of purple accents to the foliage. Often, the coloring is at its best in spring and early summer, transitioning to a muddy green as summer progresses. 'Brunette' is a selection with copper-colored highlights over a green base, which yielded the seedling Fred named 'Hillside Black Beauty'. Fred's selection retains a far more steadfast coppery purple coloring throughout the summer as seen above. It looks fantastic mixed with chartreuse, light greens and of course pink, purple and orange. The purple pigmentation is often a modified response to bright light and serves to protect the leaf from scorching. Not surprisingly then, Hillside Black Beauty develops and retains the foliage color best in bright light or sunnier locations, providing the soil moisture is adequate. The flower racemes have a dark purple central stem and the flowers have a wash of light pink.

Despite the lure of the dark purple foliage colors, it is the majestic tall flower stems and gleaming white flowers of our native *Actaea racemosa* that I find the most appealing. Woodland

gardens have a wealth of blooms and interest in spring, yet come summer that wealth of flowering plants and in particular those with height rapidly dwindle. Bugbane certainly helps to fill this void and through the act of peering through a veil of tall leafless flower stems it provides an incredible feeling of depth to a garden. This is a design trick that I ‘borrowed’ from an expert gardener and a trick that I hope you will ‘borrow’ as well!



Bruce Crawford

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