

On the Florilegium

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The term “florilegium” originates from Latin, with “flos” or “floris” indicating a flower, and “legere” meaning to gather, collectively signifying a “collection of flowers.” “Florilegium” historically referred to a compilation of select extracts from various literary or philosophical works. In the past, scholars created florilegia by meticulously curating insightful extracts from a broad array of texts. This curation process was akin to how a gardener selects particular flowers for a bouquet, hence the term. Unlike mere reproductions, florilegia often contained commentary or reflections from

the compiler, adding layers of interpretation and analysis to the original texts. Florilegia served as vital reservoirs of intellectual heritage, providing access to select wisdom from diverse sources. They were akin to a literary garden of ideas, where the essence of extensive readings was distilled and encapsulated for future reference. Through florilegia, scholars could navigate the intellectual landscapes of various fields, exploring ideas and reflections curated by predecessors.

But the term “florilegium” also holds a historical significance in the realm of botany. Historically, florilegia were compilations of botanical illustrations, often accompanied by descriptions, showcasing a variety of plants, especially those found within a particular garden or region. These compilations emerged during the 16th and 17th centuries, a period when exotic plants were being introduced to Europe from other parts of the world, sparking curiosity and a desire for documentation among horticulturists and botanists. Botanical florilegia served as both a record and a means of sharing knowledge about the diverse plant species, including their appearance, medicinal properties, and cultivation requirements. The illustrations were meticulously crafted to portray the plants with a high degree of accuracy, allowing individuals who might never encounter the plants in person to study their features. The creation of a botanical florilegium required a harmonious blend of artistic skill, botanical knowledge, and a meticulous eye for detail. Each illustration within a florilegium was crafted to convey the unique characteristics of a particular plant species, often with a focus on aspects like leaf arrangement, flower structure, and fruiting bodies which were crucial for the identification and understanding of the plant.

If these compendia advanced and disseminated knowledge, it was not innocent. Collections of exotic plants discovered in far-flung regions became symbols of wealth, prestige, and the vast reach of colonial empires. Florilegia served as a means to document, display, and circulate these botanical treasures back in Europe. Botanical expeditions and the subsequent transportation of exotic plant species were facilitated by colonial networks, providing the necessary infrastructure and resources for the collection, documentation, and dissemination of botanical specimens. The illustrations within florilegia often depicted these exotic species with an aura of rareness and desirability, further fueling the colonial appetite for the exotic and the unknown. The possession and display of these plants was emblematic of colonial domination and control over conquered territories and their natural resources. The botanical gardens of Europe, filled with exotic species documented in florilegia, stood as living testimonials to the colonial enterprise. The practice also had a significant impact on indigenous communities. The removal of plants from their native lands for documentation in florilegia often occurred without regard for the knowledge, rights, or wishes of the local people. The traditional knowledge

held by indigenous communities about the local flora was often overlooked or appropriated without credit, as the colonial botanists and horticulturists took center stage in the narrative crafted by florilegia. The harvest of exotic plants often caused the destruction of indigenous habitats and the lifeways of those areas while also causing massive ecological disruption as the introduction of non-native plants altered habitat dynamics and impacted the fauna that depended on native vegetation for survival. The widespread cultivation and dissemination of exotic species, spurred in part by the allure created through florilegia, has produced ecological imbalances and the homogenization of global flora. Even our own house has two Japanese Maples, the ultimate “specimen tree,” ubiquitous as a marker of middle-brow taste. Although these were planted when our house was built, I don’t have the heart to pull them out, so they stay, reminders of the colonial legacy of industrial gardening.



A bitternut hickory seedling in late April. Not only did I not plant this tree, we have none on our property or any of the properties directly abutting our house. Likely planted by a squirrel or chipmunk—although perhaps a bird—in ten years this tree will provide food for animals as well as for us while also providing needed shade, privacy and beauty for our bedroom.

Today the concept of florilegium finds a literal expression at my property, Highland House in Montclair, New Jersey, and this gardener's log. Here, the garden embodies a living collection of native plants, each selected much as the florilegia were. The garden at Highland House is not merely a garden; it is a curated collection that tells the story of the region's natural heritage. Every plant chosen for the landscape brings with it a unique narrative, an

ecological significance, and a contribution to the local biodiversity. Similar to how each extract in a traditional florilegium was selected for its insight or beauty, each plant in this garden is selected for its ecological value, its historical significance in the region, or its ability to contribute to a habitat for local wildlife. Although returning to a condition of pristine wilderness is impossible (would this have been 1609 prior to Henry Hudson's arrival at Newark Bay or 8,000 years ago, at the time of the first human settlement in the area?), it is possible to not only nurture the flora that belong here, but to create micro-habitats for the native fauna: woodchucks, rabbits, foxes, raccoons, opossums, and skunks are all visitors to this property (whitetail deer as well, although they are vastly overpopulated and need culling, do not need my help) as are a myriad bird species from warblers to woodpeckers to raptors.

As a florilegium, this section of the site, sets out not to chronicle each plant in detail, but as a gardener's log on an artist and historian of architecture's web site, describes what is happening here and invites engagement with the broader narratives of design, ecology, history, and place. Inspired by sites such as [James Golden's View from Federal Twist](#), this is a collection of thoughts, images, and narratives around native plant gardening. In essence, 'The Florilegium' is an invitation to wander through a digital garden of ideas, where the tradition of thoughtful curation meets the tangible beauty of our native flora, fostering a richer comprehension and a deeper conversation on the interplay between the natural and the built environment.