



## Area's state flowers varied

By Arthur O. Tucker

I grew up in Pennsylvania, where most people quote an apocryphal story that it is illegal to pick the Pennsylvania state flower, mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). It really isn't illegal (except on state lands, where it is illegal to pick anything), but the story has helped preserve the native mountain laurel.

Delaware's state flower, the peach blossom (*Prunus persica*) isn't even native to Delaware. So how did this happen? In the late 19th century, a number of citizens favored the choice of a native goldenrod (*Solidago* sp.) as the state flower for Delaware, but the peach farmers organized a petition by school children; so, on May 9, 1895 the peach blossom was adopted as the state flower.

Ironically, at about the same time as this legislative action, "peach yellows," a bacterium-like phytoplasma (*Chlorogenus persicae*), decimated Delaware peach orchards. By 1900, the number of peach trees had fallen to 2,441,650, a shrinkage of almost one-half in 10 years.

By 1940, only 314,684 peach trees were reported. Thus, some have called Delaware's state flower an anachronism. What about the native goldenrods? Well, on June 24, 1996, sweet goldenrod (*Solidago odora*) was declared the Delaware state herb. And, no, goldenrods are not a major cause of hay fever (goldenrod pollen is not well adapted for wind transport; the inconspicuous brown and green ragweeds, which bloom at the same time and shed

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abundant pollen in the wind, get the blame).

Maryland's state flower, the black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) is native. This was approved on April 18, 1918, but here, again, the goldenrod was favored by others. However, the loyalty to the black-eyed Susan became so great that in 1959 Sen. Glenn Beall proposed it as a national flower (in 1986, President Reagan declared the rose as the national floral emblem).

Black-eyed Susans are often offered by nurseries, but the nursery offerings are usually selections made in Germany, where our native *Rudbeckia* species are greatly appreciated by gardeners.

Virginia's state flower, the native dogwood (*Cornus florida*) was legally adopted in March 1918. Virginia also shares this state flower with North Carolina.

The dogwood's true flowers, however, are in the center, tiny and yellow-green; what many call the "petals" are really four bracts, naturally varying from white to dark pink. Dogwood anthracnose (*Discula destructiva*) has decimated this understory tree of our woods.

The shiny, red fruits of the native dogwood are a vital ecological link in feeding birds in the fall, and the gradual loss of the native dogwood could approach that of the American chestnut. Dogwood anthracnose first appeared in the 1970s; simultaneously in Washington, where it attacked the Pa-



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**Although not native to the state, the peach blossom is Delaware's state flower.**

cific Dogwood (*Cornus nuttallii*), and Connecticut; its origin is unknown.

The modern hybrids of Dr. Orton from Rutgers University of American dogwood with the Chinese or Japanese dogwood (*C. kousa*) are somewhat resistant to dogwood anthracnose, but, unfortunately, provide no food for birds in the fall (or, in another view, fortunately sterile so they will not become an invasive species). We really need to select anthracnose-resistant strains of our native dogwoods.

*Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call (302) 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call (302) 857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.*