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Groundnuts: What's in a name?

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: A bee enjoys a hopniss flower — Apios americana — on a vine that twines through tomatoes. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Some permaculture plants have been part of horticultural programs for centuries. The food value of perennial *Apios americana* tubers contributes to their distribution all along the northeastern seaboard and inland to Colorado. Nomadic indigenous tribes may have planted these wild edibles along their routes to guarantee seasonal food.

I refer to them first by their scientific name because few plants have so many confusing sobriquets: groundnut, openauk, hodoimo (in Asia), cinnamon vine, potato bean, Indian potato, American groundnut, and hopniss, said to originate with the Lenape people.

Curious explorers should use the Latin/scientific name to avoid an avalanche of results about peanuts (*Arachis hypogaea*), which are called groundnuts as well. Because peanuts are a commercial crop, their information overpopulates versus that of the pre-economic hopniss.

I have grown hopniss for three years on Harstine Island, and have found it a curiously tenacious perennial. This flowering vine can grow up to 16 feet. In our climate, I have seen it top out at 10 feet, and this year is the first time it has flowered.

The beautiful magenta flowers have the shape of orchids or snub-nosed wisteria, which is telling because both wisteria and hopniss fix nitrogen. They are said to smell like violets. As of this writing mine haven't opened and everything still smells like smoke.

In the Olympic Peninsula, hopniss may set seed in hotter years. Cultivariable's William Whitson harvested seed in 2016, and my Virginia hopniss is flowering right now. An early frost would kill the seeds, so I'm hoping this mild summer will carry on.

Seeds are not the principal means of propagating hopniss, however. According to early English settlers, they can be cooked like peas. Hopniss' edible tubers form on long strings like rosary beads. These can be found up to 3 feet away from the original planting. Planted sideways and kept moist, tubers will sprout in late spring, but watch out for slugs. I grow them to 4 inches before planting and use the slug deterrents I've discussed in earlier columns.

Whitson recommends planting them in dedicated areas, but I have seen them return in both annual beds and perennial placements. The greatest flourishing is happening on a slash-pile mound that I managed for biochar and layered with maple leaf mulch and a surface of 60/20/20 manure/sand/peat. All my plantings are watered automatically in the early morning with drip lines.

In the second year, I had given up on the hopniss, but after planting tomatoes, squash and sweet potatoes there I found their lovely vines erupting through the leaves and flowering. In a different location, after planting tomatoes a row of neglected hopniss returned after a year under weeds. Still others appeared after 12 months of snoozing when I planted potatoes and goldenberries near them.

So they're beautiful, perennial, nectary plants (feeding pollinators) that fix nitrogen and provide food for humans. The shoots, flowers and beans are edible, but especially the tubers. But how do they taste?

I can't say. This might be the first year I have enough of a yield to harvest. That certainly isn't because I've babied them.

I defer to such august personages as Thoreau, who pronounced it a "fabulous fruit" with a "sweetish taste" that was "better boiled than roasted." Common descriptions have it as a nutty potato with a fibrous texture, in its second year typically the size of a walnut (although Dr. Blackmon's breeding programs at Louisiana State University developed tubers the size of a navel orange). They're said to make great chips.

Some people have a reaction to eating them. Whitson recommends eating a small amount 10 times to see whether they disagree with you.

Some accounts attribute a "beany" taste to the tubers, which makes sense because hopniss is a legume with three times the protein of potatoes. Honest-food.net has interesting suggestions about how to prepare the tubers, as well as historical uses by tribe: the Delaware use the tuber flour to thicken soups, the Cherokee eat the beans, the Menominee cook the tubers with maple syrup and the Dakota use them like potatoes.

After years of replanting meager yields, I'm looking forward to a harvest I can play with!

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*