GEORGESON BOTANICAL GARDEN

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS

University of Alaska Fairbanks
School of Natural Resources and Extension

SNRE
SCHOOL OF NATURAL RESOURCES AND EXTENSION

Georgeson Botanical Notes No. 52 (1993) - Revised 2014

Lost and Found--An Heirloom Plant from Fairbanks Gardens

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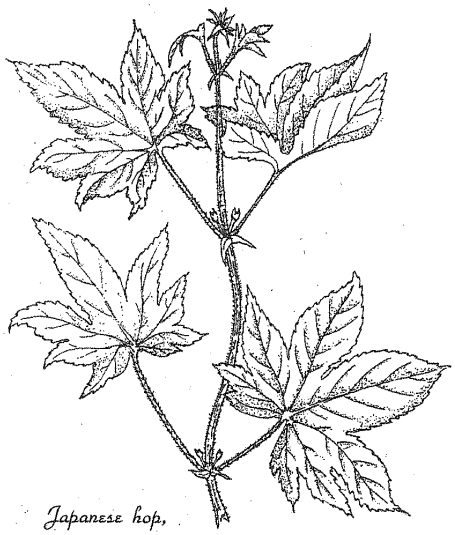
Peruse the photographic collections in UAF's Rasmuson Library Archives, and you will find many photos of Fairbanks in the early 1900's. Back then, agriculture was big business mostly because high transportation costs and long distances from markets limited the importation of many perishable foods. People had to grow their own, pay outrageous prices, or do without.

In addition to food gardens, many pioneers grew ornamentals to decorate their cabins in the short growing season and provide a bit of a connection with gardens "back home." Old-fashioned favorites such as pansies, sweet peas and calendulas adorned planter boxes and flower beds around the cabins. Besides the flowers, one plant that appears in many Archive photos is a vine that grew up string trellises along the sides of buildings or porches. The vine had large, lobed leaves and no flowers. Some of the plants had variegated (white-splotched) leaves.

No one at the GBG knew the identity of this vine. I explored many gardens throughout the old sections of downtown Fairbanks and couldn't find any remnants of the vine. I asked numerous local gardeners if they knew the vine's identity but met with no success. Local Realtor, Robert Fox, speculated the vine might be hops (*Humulus lupulus*), whose flowers are used to flavor beer. He had seen hops growing in the Anchorage area and thought the vines were similar.

I sent the old photos to the National Clonal Germplasm Repository for hops in Corvallis, Oregon. Geneticist Al Haunold said, "No, the vine is not hops; but what about some kind of grape? And by the way, would you like to try some hops?"

A few days later we received a box full of rooted hop cuttings including an ornamental hopvine called 'Blue Northern Brewer'. Anyone driving by the experiment station might have wondered what the strange wooden A-framed trellis was in the fields south of the railroad tracks. It is a hopvine trellis, and undergraduate student, Steve Becker, is now evaluating hops as a possible crop for Alaska.



The hopvines grew well in containers in the greenhouse but died-back shortly after being planted outdoors. New growth began in midsummer, and the hopvines were up to 15-feet (4.5 meters) tall by late August. No flowers were produced the first year. The ornamental cultivar, Blue Northern Brewer, was planted in the GBG annual flower display garden but was accidentally mown down in midsummer. It is still alive, but barely.

Despite the interesting diversion into the culture of hops, I still had not identified our mystery vine. I posted a photograph of the vine in the garden. Of the thousands of people who visited, only one attempted to guess its identity. That person thought it was the popular canary-bird vine (*Tropaeolum peregrinum*). The leaves of the canary-bird vine have a similar lobed pattern, but they are tiny in comparison with the vine in the photos.

Although the plant was not the hopvine, there were some similarities-the rough-texture of the leaves and the way the vine climbed by twining around the trellis. I searched the literature for descriptions of vines and learned of a relative of the hopvine called Japanese hops (*Humulus japonicus*). The description appeared similar to what I saw in the old photos. Pat Wagner located a source of seeds, and we grew the plants this past summer in the annual flower display garden.

Most visitors to the garden probably didn't notice the bright green vine that gradually covered a portion of the red fence near the observation deck. It had no fancy blooms, just mounds of coarse, green leaves. As the vine matured, we were certain it was the same plant as in the old photographs.

Japanese hops are native to China and Japan. Like the common hop, it is a herbaceous perennial vine with rough, prickly, twining stems. The plants are dioecious, meaning individual plants have either male or female flowers. Both types of plants must be grown together to produce seeds.

The leaves are very large, deeply lobed and serrated. The plant does not have tendrils but climbs by twining around a support.

At lower latitudes, the plant is grown as an annual, and it self seeds. This habit has labeled Japanese hops as a weed "suitable only to cover a pile of soil or unsightly rocks" (*Wyman's Gardening Encyclopedia*).

Contrast this description with one from *The Century Book of Gardening* published circa 1910. "A pretty, light green annual climber of wonderfully quick growth. It will soon cover a pillar or run over an arbor or pergola." Both the green-leaved vines and the variety *variegatus*, with its leaves splotched and streaked with white, were popular garden plants at the turn of the century, but have lost favor recently.

The plants growing at the GBG are not as showy as the most popular vines grown in Fairbanks today: the canary-bird vine and scarlet runner bean (*Phaseolus coccineus*), but they would provide a nice, solid green background for more showy flowers. And, I suppose, they would help hide the old garbage can in the back yard. This plant definitely belongs in any garden whose purpose is to recreate a bit of early Fairbanks history.

Originally published in Georgeson Botanical Garden Review Vol. 2, Fall 1993

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