

## Sweet legumes — locusts and honeylocusts

By Michael Pollock

In April, so many trees are blooming it is hard to focus on one, but some of the most beautiful are black locusts with their hanging white blossoms. In May, other locusts have pink flowers. Honey locusts bloom in spring but are more remarkable for their huge seedpods in the fall. These are all legumes, but despite sharing the name locust, they are in different genera. The Jamestown colonists lived in shelters with black locust posts, and imagined these trees resembled another legume, carob, or locust. Carob is also called St John's bread, because these are the "locusts" John the Baptist ate, or because the dry pods sound like insects.

Most of the locusts are in the Robinia genus, and the tallest and most common is black locust, *R. pseudoacacia*. All of the locusts have pinnately compound leaves, resembling feathers, especially new leaves. Each leaf is made of paired oval leaflets, without serration, with another at the tip. They go limp at night, another leguminous feature, presumably for defense. The leaves alternate along somewhat zigzagging twigs. At the base of each leaf are a pair of spines up to an inch long, though the spines are mainly on new growth. The leafbuds are hidden, unlike the buds of oaks.

Racemes of flowers, glowing soft white in the late spring sun, hang below graceful, unfolding emerald green leaves, sometime between mid-April and the beginning of May. Such beauty seems short-lived, or at any rate they are often done before I get to my local grove. The flowers are both male and female and a yellow marking on the largest of five petals guides pollinators such as bees, wasps, sphinx moths, and hummingbirds. Up to 14 seeds develop in flat, finger-sized seedpods.

Around here, black locusts are usually small trees, but exceptional specimens can get 100' tall and 6' across. I thought they liked dry slopes, but actually, they prefer somewhat moist conditions near water, though their roots can go very deep. Locusts are fast-growing pioneers, only living about a century.

In researching this article, I was surprised to learn that all of these trees are thought to have originally come from the Appalachians and west. Possibly Indians spread black locusts to the coast. Many places in western NC are named for a locust. Locusts were wildly



Sweet legumes in all their glory.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL POLLOCK

popular in Europe in the early 19th century. The genus is named for French royal herbalist Jean Robin, or his son Vespasien.

Black locusts have superlative wood, being among the hardest, strongest, and stiffest of American woods, very resistant to rot and shrinkage, and releasing the most energy when burned, as well as polishing to a naturally varnished look. Most of Jamestown's locust posts were still standing a century later. Another advantage is the abundance of strong heartwood in even young locusts. Apparently pests are doom locust for timber. Locust borers are pretty black and yellow beetles with brown legs that live on goldenrod flowers, but their grubs tunnel through black locusts. Nonetheless, locust has been used for posts, railroad ties,

handles, powerline insulators, wooden nails (allegedly key to a US naval victory in the War of 1812), mill pulleys, rakes, wheels, and clubs.

Many caterpillars eat the leaves, including silver spotted skippers; pepper and salt moths, famous through textbooks for industrial natural selection; locust underwings, with their glowing red and black hindwings; and poodle-like white marked tussock moth caterpillars. The trees also get locust leafminers and locust twig borers. New leaves and bark might poison livestock, but deer, rabbits, and bobwhites eat the seeds. Fritters can be made with the flowers, but everything else is toxic to humans. Despite this, locust has been used medicinally here and in China. Only American Robinias survived the ice ages, but introduced

black locusts are used in Chinese agriculture.

The pink locusts aren't often covered in tree guides, but there seem to be several in NC. Bristly locust, or rose acacia (*R. hispida*), is a small bush with twigs covered in stiff hairs. I've only seen them at the Sandling Beach area of Falls Lake, where pale pink blossoms under small pines in a circle of road caught my eye. The caterpillars of dreamy duskywing butterflies in the mountains reportedly prefer this locust. Others might be around: clammy locust (*R. viscosa*), with sticky twigs; downy locust (*R. elliotii*), with gray fuzzy twigs; and smooth *R. nana*.

Honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) are rare trees resembling locusts but their leaves can divide again, to become bipinnate, and can be serrated. Their crooked reddish-brown spines can be a foot long, and split into three points (thus the species name triacanthos, while the genus honors a German botanist). These spines are actually branches, occasionally sprouting leaves. Honeylocusts were called Confederate pintrees in Florida, because the spines were used like safety pins. The greenish flowers are inconspicuous, and each tree has one sex, or divided on different branches. Their fleshy, curled, black seedpods, up to 18" long, resemble belts. Unlike black locusts, honeylocusts don't have root nodules to fix nitrogen. Honeylocusts can live about 125 years and grow 140' tall, leading to the question of what their spines are defending against! A large tree on a bank near the confluence of the Rocky and Deep rivers at the White Pines Preserve is probably a honeylocust. Thornless cultivated honeylocusts are common along streets.

Honeylocust moths, a giant silkworm; Canadian melanophilias, a large inchworm you probably have at your porch light now, and other caterpillars and insects eat honeylocust. Cattle browse the leaves and seedpods, if they can get past the spines. Both humans and animals like the sweet pulp (not to be confused with Kentucky coffeebeans), and the pods are fermented with persimmons to make honeylocust beer. Chinese honeylocusts were once thought to produce cocaine. Locust borers don't bother honeylocust, yet its wood is rarely used, though the Cherokees made honeylocust bows.

*Michael Pollock is a freelance writer living in southern Durham and founded Northeast Creek Stream Watch (www.northeastcreek.org). He studied biology and anthropology at UNC.*

### COLLINS MOUNTAIN GRADING

- Specializing in affordable small jobs
- Driveway construction and grading
- Lot clearing, site preparation, backfilling, french drains, ditching, rough landscaping

**Mike Resnik • 919.929.3324**  
www.collinsmountaingrading.com

### EXPERT, FRIENDLY DOOR REPAIR



## The Door DOCTOR

Doors and Hardware Specialist

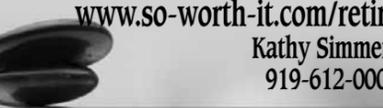
Door Repairs • Weatherproofing  
Door Adjustments • Replacements  
Garage Doors • Lock changes

Residential • Commercial  
LOCAL REFERENCES  
Robert Sprenger | 919.444.1533  
www.fixyourdoors.com

### NEED MORE INCOME FOR YOUR RETIREMENT?

Work from home advertising for an Inc. 500 company.  
Find out more today!

www.so-worth-it.com/retire  
Kathy Simmers  
919-612-0009



## So Worth It

BALANCE + FREEDOM + PEACE OF MIND

SILK HOPE

## BENEFIT BINGO

Food • Drinks • Desserts

### NEXT BINGO

**April 2, 16, May 7**  
(1st, 3rd, & 5th Thursdays each month)

**Silk Hope Community Center**

DOORS OPEN: 5:30 PM Total Prize Money Over \$1,100!  
EARLY GAME: 6:30 PM  
REGULAR GAME: 7:15 PM

**4221 Silk Hope Road, Siler City**  
www.silkhopen.org • 919.663.0331

The Silk Hope Ruritan Club will donate funds from BENEFIT BINGO to local schools, scholarships, teacher supplies, and aiding and improving the community.

## Color Your World

with an incredible eclectic variety of fabrics, tea towels, baskets, yard art, crafts, antiques and more...



## FRENCH CONNECTIONS

where South Africa and France collide in Harmony and Art

178 Hillsboro Street, Pittsboro • 919.545.9296  
SHOP ONLINE! www.french-nc.com  
Mon-Sat: 10:30-5:30, First Sundays: 12-5.



## GLASS & WINDOW WAREHOUSE

Residential • Commercial • Auto

Shower Doors • Table Tops  
Mirrors • Glass Replacement  
Windshields • Storefronts



Authorized Shipping Center for UPS with Fax and Copy Service

**919-742-1003**  
812 East Third Street, Siler City  
www.glasswarehouse.net

Licensed & Insured NC General Contractor  
Family Owned & Operated Glass Shop

## Rosemary HOUSE

BED & BREAKFAST



Gracious, Comfortable Guest Rooms

76 West Street, Pittsboro  
888.643.2017 • 919.542.5515  
www.rosemary-bb.com

Rosemary... for Friendship and Remembrance