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Gardenwise: Horror in the Garden

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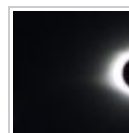
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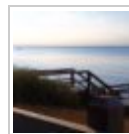
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Houttuynia: The Godzilla of the Garden

By Susan Tito

When I was a child, one of my greatest pleasures was watching horror movies with my father. The films we fancied were not the gory fare that's so prevalent today but campy motion pictures featuring plodding creatures and razor-thin story lines. Our favorite beast was Godzilla, the King of the Monsters.

In the horror genre, Godzilla, who has been trampling downtown Tokyo for decades, is an unstoppable force of nature. But this "king" has nothing on

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another fiend, a real-life one from the plant world — *Houttuynia cordata*, ‘Chameleon,’ commonly known as the chameleon plant.

Never heard of *Houttuynia* (pronounced hoot-tie-knee-a)? Before I studied horticulture, I didn’t either. By the time you get to the end of this column, you’ll wish you had amnesia.

But first some words of wisdom from the 1986 remake of “The Fly”: “Be afraid. Be very afraid.”

You’ve been warned. The chameleon is the most invasive plant I’ve encountered and among the most beautiful, which makes it insidious. It’s an Asian import that’s about 15 inches tall with heart-shaped variegated leaves in vivid red, green, pink and yellow; bright red stems; and snowy-white bracts. If you see one, you’ll be mesmerized.

An acquaintance had chameleon plant growing in her Port Jefferson garden.

“I must have some!” I exclaimed, taking leave of my senses like Norman Bates from “Psycho”: “We all go a little mad sometimes...”

I planted them in the front of my property and they spread slowly at first, transforming into a lush, colorful groundcover. My acquaintance moved to Florida, never to be heard from again, unaware of the hell that she had unleashed on my property.

All was well for three years but then something happened in year four — something unspeakably evil.

It’s as if the plant consulted with the Invisible Man in the 1933 film of the same name: “We’ll begin with a reign of terror...”


Because that’s exactly what happened. My lovely plants revealed their true nature: They lost their striking variegation and good manners. They reverted to all green, doubled in height and overtook everything in their path. They plowed through clumps of lily of the valley — which has its own reputation for



Susan Tito

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being a thug in the garden – and “devoured” daylillies and astilbe.



Houttuynia reveals its true colors

I tried to dig them out but to no avail: The plants spread by underground runners. If I left even the tiniest root fragment, they reanimated. I did some research and learned that chameleon plant earned a spot on the Global Invasive Species Database and was banned from New Zealand. I went on online garden forums and voraciously read about other people's

experiences and learned just how awful this plant is. For example, did you know that the pungent scent from the chameleon plant's roots — which smells like citrusy petroleum — could trigger migraines in sensitive individuals? Another nightmarish surprise: The plant is nearly impervious to herbicide. Those who thought they eliminated it saw it return years later like zombies from “Night of the Living Dead”: “They won't stay dead.”

The best chance I have for eradication is to excavate several feet down and remove all soil and plant material then spot treat any that regenerates. Will I succeed? Stay tuned.

The good folks at the Long Island Native Plant Initiative (LINPI) feel my pain and have gently reminded me how important it is to choose native plants over exotic imports. With natives, you know what to expect. But there are other benefits as well.



“Being locally adapted to the environment means less time watering and fertilizing, which gives you more time to enjoy the scenery while protecting our critical water resources and providing habitat to our native fauna,” said Polly Weigand, executive director of the Riverhead-based LINPI and interim coordinator of the Long Island Invasive Species Management Area (LIISMA).

To be clear, there are some native plants that are vigorous spreaders, such as *Asclepias tuberosa* — milkweed — which I detailed in the May 1 issue of this publication. It all comes down to positives outweighing negatives.

“We are not going to complain about the wealth of habitat and enjoyment milkweed brings or the need to occasionally hand-pull some overabundant stems,” said Brian Smith, an LINPI board member who focuses on education and outreach.

I couldn’t agree more, which is why I am educating others about the dangers of non-native plant species while concentrating efforts on defeating my chameleon plant monster.

Because as the tagline in “Jaws: The Revenge” states: “This time it’s personal.”

Susan Tito is a freelance writer and proprietor of Summerland Garden Design & Consulting. She earned a certificate in ornamental garden design from the New York Botanical Garden and is a member of the American Horticultural Society and Garden Writers Association. She can be reached at stito630@gmail.com.

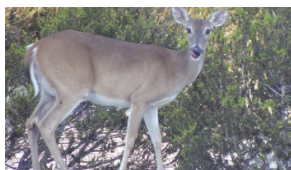
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