

The Garden Path

Kanzan Kitsune

Spring 2018

Sudajii (*Castanopsis cuspidata* var. *sieboldii*): Ample moss-covered trunk rooted firmly on the ridge line rises to a vast canopy, drinking plentifully of sunlight to provide the community below moist shade. Sudajii, or shii, the elder, teaches the forest how to grow (and long ago taught humans how to grow shiitake mushrooms). Come Fall, this generous canopy showers the land with nuts, Perpetual forest. Perpetual food, fuel, medicine, and materials.

In Sudajii's shade grows cha, té, tea (*Camellia sinensis*). That severe old wall-gazer Bodhidharma cuts off his eyelids and where they fall to the ground tea grows. A leaf falls in Shen Nong's bowl of boiling water...

Crossing the tea house floor in measured steps, every action performed with practiced serenity. A ritual that comes close to tea's spirit medicine. Tea monocultures covering entire mountain sides do not.

Tall, perfectly straight, evenly spaced: An economic uniformity utterly alien to the wild. A sugi (*Cryptomeria japonica*) plantation bereft of a true forest's anarchic vigor, free association, and multi-generational growing, teaching, feeding. A lifespan determined by "board feet", machine size, global markets... left standing for as long as it remains cheaper to fell tropical rainforests. Hopelessly incapable of performing the necessary ecosystem functions across the vast tracts it covers, it sways sadly, listening for chainsaw or strong wind. Sensing the movement of vines making their way from the regenerating forest below.

From the slopes bearing down on the stream, a panoply of trees, shrubs, vines, birds, fireflies, monkeys... Ferns at the water's edge, loquat and wild fig above. Kudzu, akebi, wisteria – vines clambering all over and through the mountain chestnuts, and higher. Gripping the sugi at the plantation's edge, they mercifully topple these misplaced shallow rooted anomalies. Healing is what plants do. A "chaos" that protects the forest interior, re-wilds domesticated lands and provides the animals (like us) with food and medicine.

A little more space, a little more light. Forest and human habitation meet. Stream side: Berries and herbs and thickets of itadori pin down the forest's protective mantle.

A pattern repeats. Fruit and nut bearing trees entwined with vines. A sub-canopy of cha, fig, mulberry... Lower still, shrubs, brambles, and herbs.

Itadori (Japanese knotweed, *Polygonum cuspidatum* syn. *Fallopia japonica*, *Reynoutria japonica*): Itadori's succulent roots are a spring staple. The hollow tube-like stems snapped and gathered when about thirty centimetres tall.

Called “invasive,” a sort of war is waged against it in North America – where Lyme disease has reached near-epidemic proportions [ed. – see *Return Fire* vol.4 pg34]. Japanese knotweed is one of the premier herbs for the treatment of Lyme disease.

Antibacterial, antiviral, antispirechetal, antifungal, immunostimulant, immunomodulant, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antimutagenic, central nervous system relaxant, central nervous system protectant, anticarcinogenic, angiogenesis modulator, vasodialator, antiasthmatic, cardioprotective, antiaththerosclerotic, antihyperlidemic, antineoplastic, hepatoprotective, inhibits platelet aggregation, antithrobotic, antipyretic, analgesic, antiulcer, hemostatic, and astringent.

As it rids the body of deep infections and toxins, so it rids the earth of heavy metal contamination and cleans polluted streams. The Japanese name *itadori* means removes pain.

Cold, cold water from the heart of the mountain: Slick, mossy surfaces. Dragonfly waits on a blade of rush. Spider waits too, web catching the glance of Sun. Dragonfly darts up to a fern frond perched high over the stream. Another sits mid-stream on a sun warmed stone – orange wings, sleek silver body terminating in two large black orbs. All of a sudden, both dragonflies launch above the stream, tumble through the air, chase one another to the far bank. Spider comes to wait. Water flows. Dragonfly returns to the same blade of rush as before.

Kiwi climbs persimmon, making for the Sun. Below, cool water bubbles up from the earth – a gently carved course lined with aromatic peppermint, water celery and watercress, fuki and reeds.

With back turned to a young stand of koriyanagi willow – some of these slim pliable canes soon to become baskets – north across the far edge of a small clearing two chestnut canopies meet. From trunk to drip-line, from deep to dappled shade, myoga ginger spreads. In the v-shaped sunny nook, formed where the chestnuts’ long lower branches stretch and touch, is yuzu, a citrus. In front, a stand of yacon metabolizes full sun into sweet, crunchy tubers. To the west, a small thicket of jerusalem artichoke, tall slender stalks climbed by *Apios americana*, together sheltering the splayed deep green foliage of ashitaba. On the western edge of the clearing, another citrus – this with mandarin-like fruit – and persimmon. Further west, the canopy starts to climb. A large loquat, then higher to nashi pear and higher still to walnut. Rising with the canopy the twining akebi (chocolate vine) and carpeting the ground below, the winter raspberry, fuyuichigo.

No weeds, no crops. No invasives, exotics, natives. No pests or beneficial insects. A post- (and pre) agricultural landscape.

Entering the forest to collect fallen branches with which to we cook our meals, I go a little farther to visit a friend. The forest is unusually still. In the western sky, the sun blazes but here, filtered by foliage, the light is soft and the air cool. A leaf falls, tracing a near perfect vertical line to the ground.

Shizuoka, Japan

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Backwoods #1

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