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Marien Helz

Ignoring the millions of photographs of Diana was impossible, but I had never made the connection between the timeless work of art and England's late princess until I saw that large picture of the statue of David and thought, "There's Diana!" I realized that Michelangelo's work had the same magnetic draw that compelled us to look at Diana's picture whenever it appeared.

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*Extreme Gardener* Susan Johnson

A former media consultant who worked hard and retired at forty, Romanczyk has spent the intervening nine years pursuing rare and unusual seeds and plants. Obsessed with orchids as a child, he was importing them by the time he was a teenager, receiving shipments from Southeast Asia. ... postmarks from all over the world arrive at his Wyoming County home.

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## Michelangelo and Diana

by Marien Helz

I recently saw a picture of Michelangelo's *David* on the cover of a magazine and realized with shock that I had seen that face carved again, this time in living flesh, and this time on the face of a woman. In the last decade and a half, we've seen the same visage photographed again and again. It has drawn us with an irresistible appeal. Ignoring the millions of photographs of Diana was impossible, but I had never made the connection between the timeless work of art and England's late princess until I saw that large picture of the statue of David and thought, "There's Diana!" I realized that Michelangelo's work had the same magnetic draw that compelled us to look at Diana's picture whenever it appeared.



It reminded me of how there are certain qualities of beauty that are astoundingly androgynous—they transcend gender. These are not men who are effeminate nor women who are tough, but people who have qualities of the masculine and feminine blended in an ascetic ideal. Beauty in human beings is something like a spectrum with variations between colors. Instead of red being on one end and violet on the other, colors vary with many shades of all colors.



When I saw the picture of David, it reminded me that the same is true of human faces. It's too easy to see the masculine and the feminine qualities as an either/or characteristic (one is either masculine or feminine or there is something wrong with one). In truth, some of the most attractive people have a blending of those qualities just as everyone's body chemistry contains some blending of both estrogen and testosterone. A study done on parenthood discovered that androgynous people make the best parents. This shouldn't be surprising since a woman who is afraid to throw a baseball or a man who is afraid to tie a hair ribbon is going to be missing something as a parent.



In terms of human beauty, however, we fail to think of the fact that it is often a mixing of traits that make some of the most intriguing people attractive. People like Candace Bergen, Robert Redford, Lauren Bacall, Katherine Hepburn, Paul Newman, Brooke Shields, John Kennedy Jr., as well as

most of the classic statues, for example, all have, or had, the qualities of the opposite gender in their physiognomy that causes the confluence of features that we consider to be aesthetically appealing in either gender.

People like Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor or Harrison Ford and Wayne Gretsky are at the ends of the spectrum, that is possessing a very feminine or very masculine countenance. They are attractive in their extreme just as Hugh Grant and Jodie Foster are in the convergence of both elements.

In the statue of David, furthermore, if we look only at the head, we know he's male solely from the sideburns. In all other respects, he could be either gender. The curvature of the nose, the drooping line of the lower eyelid, the tousled hair all are recast in Diana's aspect. Perhaps in our collective unconscious, we recognized her face and felt that it belonged to all of us because it had been a part of the world's culture for so long. Interesting too is the fact that she even had the name of an androgynous goddess: Diana, Goddess of the Hunt.



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## Extreme Gardener

by Susan Johnson

"One year, I got so mad at a flat of *Rosa rugosas* that weren't germinating that I threw them outside and said 'Sayonara!'," says Keith Romanczyk with a dismissive salute and a rich, thrumming laugh. "A couple of months later when spring arrived, I was straightening things up and



found that all of them had germinated. Now, I put all sorts of seeds out in the cold. When snow melts, it has an oxygenating effect and that's one of the reasons it works well in the germination process."

A former media consultant who worked hard and retired young (at forty), Romanczyk has spent the intervening nine years pursuing rare and unusual seeds and plants. Obsessed with orchids as a child, he was importing them by the time he was a teenager, receiving shipments from Southeast Asia even as the U.S. was seeking to defoliate the area they were coming from.

Today, thickly padded envelopes bearing postmarks from all over the world arrive at Romanczyk's home in Wyoming County. Their contents are tiny sealed plastic bags, no bigger than the individual stamps that conveyed them from places as diverse as China and Czechoslovakia. Inside of them are two or three and sometimes as many as six or seven seeds, each smaller than a dried lentil. Used as currency in the esoteric world of advanced horticulture, even one seed of a sufficiently unusual variety can be used as a large denomination among plant society members.

"*Paeonia suffruticosa rockii* has massive eight to twelve inch white flowers with black blotching—the same coloration characteristics as white poppies," says Romanczyk. "Although it's been hybridized for years by monks near the Zhasilenbu Temple in Xigaze City in China, it's impossible to get the true species in the trade. The only way I could get it was through a seed exchange."

That this diminutive yet sometimes priceless commodity can be exchanged at all has to do with nature's exquisite protection of plant embryos. Wrapped in hard shells that can only be opened by a specific

and individual combination of water and air, cold and warm temperatures, darkness and light, sometimes abrasion, sometimes the gut of an animal or bird, and sometimes even fire, the latent plants lie safely curled, protected from sprouting in an environment deemed unsatisfactory by evolution.

"For me, the thrill is in unlocking the mystery of their germination," says Romanczyk. Standing in front of one of three refrigerators, this one a huge Amana chosen because it has the freezer on the bottom, he plucks a few baggies from its shelves and places them on a nearby countertop, carefully patting their surfaces flat to reveal the thick white radicles of a tree peony amongst dark brown potting media. "Dr. Norman Deno is the master of seed stratification and germination. He prints a book on the subject that's considered a bible, and it's very specific about the conditions required. If you have a seed that's very rare or that you paid a lot of money for, you learn to pay close attention, for instance, to temperatures. You find yourself running around the house with a thermometer checking every corner. So then, if Deno says that cyclamens require sixty-five degrees and darkness to germinate, you say to yourself, 'OK, that's under the upstairs bathroom sink' and up they go."

For many seeds, the exact conditions for germination are known. For others, the combination is yet to be found. Still others are of such delicacy as to be considered ephemeral. Their biological clock is as short as the span of a stopwatch, counting time measured in minutes before viability expires forever.



At this level of gardening, botanical expeditions to the Kamchatka peninsula in Russia and trips to the Peony Festival in Beijing become necessary to advance the gardener's knowledge and collection. "Ninety percent of my travel these days is horticultural in nature. Some of the plants that you get through the exchanges take five years or more to bloom and they aren't keyed out (fully identified with taxonomic names) because they weren't flowering when they were collected. The plants are unknown in Western cultivation, and if you want to identify them precisely you need to go to where they were collected. Not that this is always easy. Some expeditions take only a five or six people at a time and others have warnings like 'If you're afraid of bears, don't bother to apply'."

Raised in Virginia, Romanczyk moved to rural Western New York from New Orleans in November of 1993, buying a six and a half acre property that formerly belonged to a priest who was also a horticulturist. "The priest used to perform garden weddings out here and when I saw the twenty-car parking lot, all I could think of was being able to put lots of truckloads of topsoil and manure on it. Of course, that winter it snowed fifty-eight days in a row and by the middle of February I was answering

the telephone with a whimper."

With half a dozen acres and an attached Lord and Burnham greenhouse at his disposal, Romanczyk has ample room to indulge his passion for flowers all year long. "Exotics have always appealed to me. I don't want



plants from Walmart. And, I don't want just one, I want mass plantings—twenty or thirty at a time. Right now, I want *Shortia galacifolia*, which I can get from Arrowhead Alpines for seven dollars a pot, but, when you multiply that times thirty, you begin to see the problem. On the other hand, it's a frustrating seed to germinate and grow. I've tried six or seven years in a row with no luck.

Deno says it needs exogenous chemicals, seventy degrees Fahrenheit, and light. This year, I'm going the organic route, putting a combination of oak and other leaves into the blender to make a slurry and applying that to see if it works."

This sort of persistence leads to more successes than disappointments, allowing Romanczyk to barter his horticultural fortunes with international seed exchanges and to donate some of them to the Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Garden's rare and unusual plant sale.

"Germinating stubborn plants yourself can be difficult and complicated and tedious," admits Romanczyk, "not to mention that you then have to bring up the seedlings which can be equally particular about their living conditions. But if you're lucky, you'll wind up with a rare *Rosa rugosa* that you fell in love with in the courtyard of the Sans Souci palace."

Photography by David Clark

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Word Worth®—Online monthly magazine of Ideas & the Arts

August 2002

Cover

The Mimosa Tree grows naturally and wild in the Maryland region...



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And blooms during July when other natural blossoms retire from the heat;...



Because it sheds branches and takes looking after, few choose to include it in yard design;...



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With developments pushing out the wild areas,...



Will the beautiful Mimosa Tree soon be lost from the landscape?

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