

PHOTO BY BILL FAVER

PLANTS ARE COMPETING for the basic elements they need for existence: water, sunlight, carbon dioxide, and soil.

## Competition Among The Plants

BY BILL FAVER

We Americans seem always to be interested in competition. With the endless parade of basketball, football, baseball, and other sports on our televisions, we seem to spend most of our time following our favorite team or race driver.

The countdown to the summer Olympics promises a special diversion from the political conventions and usual summer reruns. Competition is a part of our way of life. Competition is also very important in the plant world, where the struggle to survive is endless.

Plants compete for the basic necessities of their life. They need sunlight, water, carbon dioxide, minerals in the soil, space to grow. We are told plants in tropical rain forests get all the water they need, but are in constant competition for sunlight. So they grow fast up high to break through the canopy and get light.

Many of these plants are vines or airplants which need little soil. Trees and other tall plants shade out their competition by keeping light away from smaller

plants. Large leaves develop to shade out smaller plants and to give the plants a larger surface to get their light.

When plants evolve their "niche" in the community, they have less competition except among their own species. They become specialized at living in one particular soil or light condition, and other species don't require what they do. Some plants even "help" each other, but not in the sense of knowing they are assisting. Vines depend on strong trees and shrubs for a place to grow. Mosses keep a forest floor moist and provide habitat for wildflowers and ferns. Tall trees give shade to allow some other species to germinate and grow.

Competition also affects the size and shape of plants. A tree in the open in a yard or park will develop a well-rounded, symmetrical shape. In a grove or forest, the tree may be tall and straight or one-sided (even before the tree-trimmers arrive!).

Look around for ways competition is working among plants. It may not be as exciting as a Michael Jordan exhibition, but it can open up ways we can learn to appreciate the complexities and the relationships in the natural environment.

## In Response To The Dreaded Inquisition

"So where are you from?"

It sounds like such an innocent question...

And Ted Bundy seemed like such a nice guy.

Up North, people generally ask about your origins not so much out of genuine interest but as a conversation filler, to clear the pallet between more important topics: Like the amount of fat in the corned beef at Uncle Herb's boss's wife's friend's daughter's wedding reception.

In California, everyone is from somewhere else and glad to be there, so they rarely discuss their former lives. What matters on the left coast is to "be here now" and to "forget about your used-to-be."

In the South, people really want to know WHERE YOU ARE FROM: Not where you resided for most of your adult life. Not where you lived before you came here. They want to know what it says on your birth certificate.

And they want to know it very early in the getting-to-know-you game, so that later observations can be put into proper perspective.

Consequently I tend to cringe when people ask, "Where are you from?"

Because I was born in New Jersey. Exit 20-something.

But I moved away before I could talk! (See? No accent!)

And I lived in dozens of places since then! Chicago! Richmond! Cincinnati! Syracuse! Rorschacherberg, Switzerland!

And I've been in North Carolina for almost 20 years! Nearly half my life! Moved here as soon as it was

my turn to choose!

Doesn't matter. I'm still FROM New Jersey. Which for most southerners is about as endearing as saying you like to keep a dead squid in your pocket.

Trying to explain that there are indeed some nice places in New Jersey is like convincing your buddy that your date's best friend "has a swell personality."

Anyway, what's the point? Most of New Jersey IS paved (with bad roads). And much of the air IS polluted. And people there DO talk too fast and too loud without saying too much. And nobody who isn't FROM there is going to go there on purpose. Except maybe to gamble. Or to see where Bruce Springsteen grew up.

To tell the truth, I don't consider myself to be from anywhere in particular. I grew up in the back seats of cars heading for "our new home" someplace else. In fact, when I entered the ninth grade, it was my ninth school.

As a child, my favorite toys were boxes. We were always putting things into them or taking things out. It took years before I realized that you were supposed to play with what's IN the box and not the box it-

self.

I would build forts out of boxes until they collapsed. Then the flexible boxes would become "tank treads" to crawl around the yard in. When torn flat, they would be used to line the nearest hillside, where I would introduce new friends to the thrills of cardboard bob sledding.

All this moving about had its advantages and disadvantages. It gave me a broader world view and made me quickly adaptable to new people and situations. But it left me without a specific "home" to go back to.

So now when someone asks where I'm from, I immediately go on the offensive, trying to avoid being hung with the "Joizey Boy" label.

If I sense that my inquisitor is politically liberal, I tell them I'm a Native American.

That really ticks 'em off. You can be a native New Yorker if you were born in New York. And you can be a native Floridian if you were born in Florida. But unless you are of American Indian extraction, you can't be a Native American.

For the conservatives, I simply say that I was born in New Jersey...but I was conceived in Texas. After all, my folks lived in Houston before I came along. This sidetracks the issue of my origins into what computer people might call a "mind loop" of contradictions as they consider the broader questions of where my life really began.

And does it really matter after all? Personally, I like calling North Carolina "home."

So, where are you from?



Eric Carlson

## Beyond The Middle Of The Map

After I wrote last week about moving from the mountains back to Brunswick County, a friend brought me a copy of a column by Dave Barry, the funniest person in print, about his move to South Florida from Somewhere Inland.

One of the most hilarious parts had to do with flood insurance, which Dave was told does not cover you for damage caused by the following:

1. Floods.
2. Water coming into your house for any reason.

It occurred to me that people who have no affinity for coastal living have no frame of reference for understanding why those of us who live here would choose to do so. My mountain friends, to a person, refer to that region as "God's Country," a notion I find a tad near-sighted.

They've never heard of flood insurance, can't imagine living in a flat place without deciduous trees, couldn't stand to have grit on the soles of their feet, have never eaten raw oysters and have absolutely no interest in doing so. (There are mountain oysters, but from what I've heard, they bear little resemblance to seafood.)

On hearing we were leaving the Blue Ridge (commonly referred to by meteorologists as "Apple-a-CHEE-yah" or the "Appellation Region"), a number of my co-workers looked at me incredulously and said, "You'uns'll burn up this summer."

These are people who refer to everything to the right of Hickory as The Eastern Part of the State, which they perceive as a steaming salty swamp that will turn an unwashed car to solid rust overnight. These are people who have bumper stickers saying, "Make a hillbilly happy; go back to Florida."

Lynn Carlson



On the other hand, coastal folks don't seem to have the same suspicion and distaste for Appalachia. This may have something to do with the theory that Pat Conroy put forth in *The Prince of Tides*, that our forebears who stayed on the coast did so because they liked seeing sail, meeting strangers and being "citizens of the world." Folks who crossed the mountains and settled into hollers, he says, did so deliberately to isolate themselves from the outside.

As an Ocracoke Island native once told me, when I was a tourist being made to feel right at home at a local dive's New Year's Eve party, "Oi tried to live in the mountains one toime, but the people were just too \*\$#@ clannish."

The two regions have some other striking differences, among them:

■ People here drive on the right side of the road. It was not at all unusual in the mountains to round a blind curve and come headlight-to-headlight with Robert Mitchum in his *Thunder Road* pickup, heeled over on two wheels doing 65 in the left lane. This will get your blood pumping.

■ Here, I have cable television and a newspaper delivered to my home every day. My isolation made this impossible in the mountains. I have not yet decided whether this newfound umbilical cord to current trends is a blessing or a curse. But I

must admit that I am rather amused by the Psychic Friends Network (hosted by none other than Dionne Warwick) which I discovered in a fit of insomnia this week.

■ We have much more impressive bugs here. Mosquitoes are about as common as crabs in the mountains, and they're incredibly well-mannered. They light on your arm and hum softly until you discover and kill them. They don't leave welts, and they travel alone.

Mountain cockroaches are also fairly tame. Fully mature adults are about as big as a child's thumbnail, as opposed to the prehistoric critters coastal folks euphemistically refer to as water bugs. You might run into a mountain roach in your pantry once a year, but you won't flick on the lights to find them fleeing their family reunion which covered your kitchen floor.

There are striking similarities too, most notably a whole lot of newcomers who devote a lot of energy to complaining about and trying to change the customs, laws, beliefs, hobbies, attitudes, priorities, dietary habits and livelihoods of the long-time residents. Longtime coastal residents seem to be taking this with a great deal more grace than longtime mountaineers are. But it may just be a matter of time before Brunswick County gets its own version of the aforementioned bumper sticker.

Whatever your taste in topography or local color, it's never dull to live in a place that is growing and changing, struggling and compromising. That's certainly the case with the geographic extremities of North Carolina.

And in both places, I've gone to bed every night thankful that I don't live in one of those rectangular states in the middle of the map.

### MORE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Give Emergency Vehicles Right-Of-Way

To the editor:

I'm writing you this letter because of the great concern I feel for the lack of respect given to people who work with the rescue squads and fire departments in our county.

I work in South Carolina, and on my way to work, at least once a week, I pass an emergency vehicle on its way to an accident or fire. It amazes me how inconsiderate people are to these emergency vehicles. Do they ever stop to think that one day it may be their loved one in that vehicle, or that the vehicle could be going to a fire at their home?

I know there can be nothing more frustrating to emergency vehicle drivers than people who are too inconsiderate to pull over and let them by. I try to pull over whenever possible. And it would be nice to see more people being considerate to think that someone's life is more important than whether they get where they're going five minutes later.

To all the people who volunteer their lives and their time to save other people's lives, I thank you, and

want you to know that there are a few people who understand what a few minutes could mean to someone else's life.

Cyndi & Charles Testerman  
Shallotte

### A Poor Excuse

To the editor:

Concerning the letter published in the Beacon June 17, titled "Calabash Board's Priorities Misplaced," I do not know what disagreement the writer has with the Calabash commissioners.

However, if they had anything to do with the three pictures of the rear ends of women taken out of the window of the Wings store, they should be congratulated for doing their job. These swimsuit bottoms had only a thong in back. This type of nudity has been outlawed by most of our beaches. This being true, why should the town of Calabash tolerate it? Do we want to change our title from seafood capital to porno capital?

Wake up, preachers and churches.

God expects far more from us than just to accept His free gift of personal salvation. We become a part of what we tolerate. A wishbone is a poor excuse for a backbone.

William H. Stanley  
Calabash

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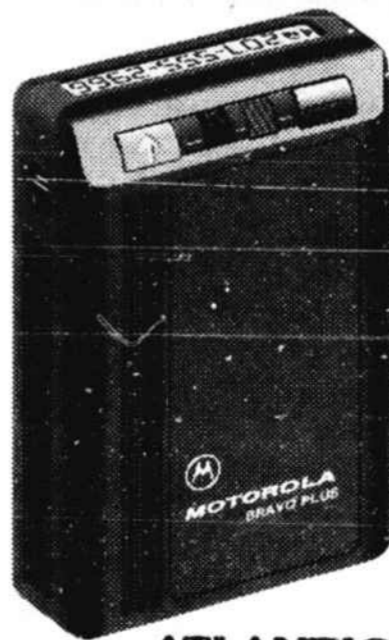
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