

CROSS POLLINATION

Newsletter of the Halton Master Gardeners



Nov. - Dec.
2017

How to Honour Our War Dead – As Fertilizer?

The “modern” wars of the 20th Century left in us a collective feeling of solemn duty to honour both the memory & the remains of soldiers who died in battles in foreign lands. In fact, we created the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to honour in perpetuity the graves & memorials of 1,700,000 men & women from Commonwealth countries who died in the two world wars. Scenes of immaculately-kept cemeteries are familiar to us all.

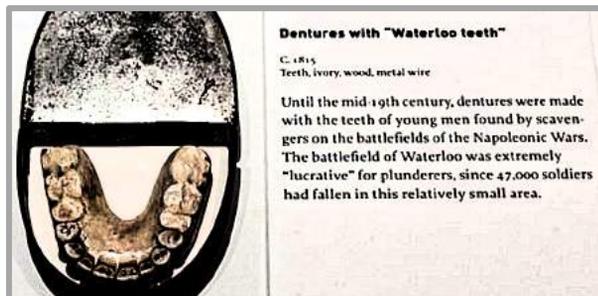


Canadian War
Cemeteries at
Holten, Vimy Ridge,
and Bény-sur-Mer



Imagine reading, then, that “we didn’t always worship the corpses. After Waterloo, the bones of the dead – Wellington’s Britons and Napoleon’s French and Blücher’s Prussians – were freighted back to Hull to use as **fertiliser** for England’s green and pleasant land, military mulch from the 1815 battlefields which also yielded fresh teeth to be reused as dentures for the living.” (Robert Fisk, [“My Father Threw Away His Poppy in Disgust”](#) in *The Independent*, 3 August 2014)

Can this wild-sounding claim really be true? Were the bones of dead soldiers really dug up from the battlefields of Waterloo, crushed and used as fertilizer for gardens & crops? Well, we do know that “Waterloo teeth” were used to make dentures for decades after the battle, as were teeth from battlefields of the US Civil War...



And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair. — Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

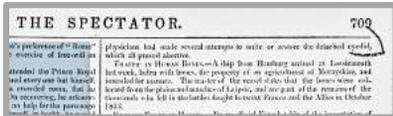
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How to Honour Our War Dead – As Fertilizer? (cont'd.)

But let's look for some historical clues to find out whether gardeners & farmers really used the bones of their own compatriots in their gardens ...



The London Quarterly, 1819

"Many tons of human bone are sent every year to the North from the large London graveyards, and bones of all descriptions are imported, and pieces of half-decayed coffin attire are found among them."

The Code of Agriculture, 5th Ed., 1832

Sir John Sinclair

"The importation of bone should be encouraged by a public bounty, and some allowance given to captains of vessels who bring bones as ballast in their ships."

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The London Spectator, 7 November 1829

"Traffic in Human Bones: A ship from Hamburg arrived last week, laden with bones intended for manure. The master of the vessel states that the bones are part of the remains of the thousands who fell in battles fought betwixt France and the Allies in October 1813."

The Pittsburgh Gazette (US), 1868

"Human bones from the Civil War battlefields of Tennessee are used to fertilize our farms and are also exported to England to fertilize theirs."



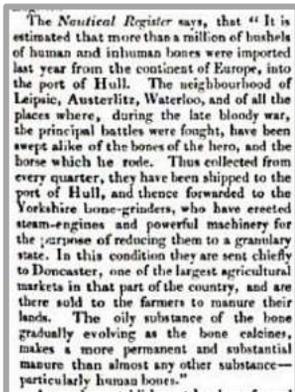
Tears for the departed, but no sentiment for the dead.

"Disposal of the Dead", Popular Science, 1874

Sir Henry Thompson, Prof. of Clinical Surgery at University College argued for cremation of human bodies on the basis of their *economic value* as fertilizer.

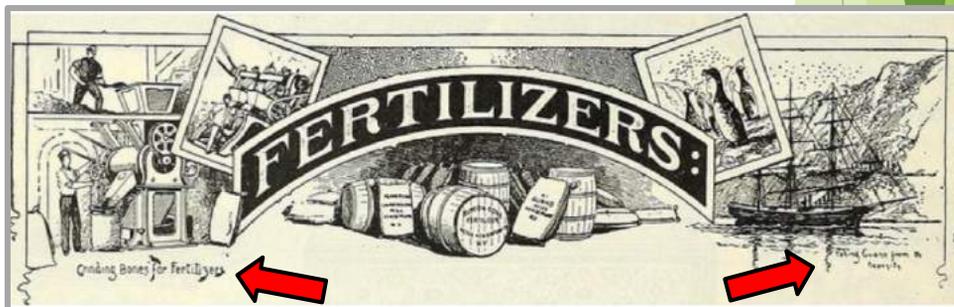
The Observer, 1874

Reporting on the import of bones from ancient tombs in Egypt: "It certainly seems hard on the great and mighty of past ages that their remains are to be used for commercial purposes, but business is business."



Cassell's Saturday Journal, 1896

"England is the world's greatest trafficker in human bones, rifling Continental charnel-houses, the mummy-pits of Egypt, and in fact almost every place which would yield bones, particularly human bones. Even cats, whole or in fragments are not objected to, as is proved by the arrival at Liverpool, two years ago, of 19-1/2 tons of embalmed cats. The reason human bones are in such demand seems to be that they are richer in mineral constituents than the ordinary ones of commerce. If this is not consoling to us poor mortals, it ought to be."



Peter Henderson & Co.'s **Nursery & Seed Trade Catalogue, 1897** shows how bird guano from Peru & the Caribbean began to replace the grinding of bones for fertilizer.

R.J. Holloway wrote in the **Cairns Post (Australia), 1917**: "Surely it will be comforting to combatants to know they have not died in vain, and that their bodies after death will still do good by helping to grow food for the living also. It should be a pleasant idea that their remains will help make explosives and assist in carrying on the war".

But Holloway's comments were soundly rejected by readers, perhaps showing that public attitudes to the reuse of human bones had been changed by the carnage of the First World War.



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The Poinsettia: From Scrubby Shrub to Designer Darling

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Now considered a holiday tradition, the poinsettia is evidence of what marketing can do, even for scrubby, weedy shrubs on remote Mexican mountain slopes. From its native ground on Pacific slopes & dry intermontane forests of central Mexico, *Euphorbia pulcherrima* has moved from an Aztec ceremonial & medicinal plant to become the world's most valuable potted plant.

The plant was greatly admired by Joel Poinsett (from whom its common English name was derived), first US envoy to Mexico (1825-1829), who brought specimens back to grow in the US. The original plant as it grows wild in Mexico is a tall, gangly plant with few leaves while flowering in winter, and bracts that are much smaller & narrower than we are used to seeing. See the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México's [Wild Poinsettia Page](#) for information & photos of poinsettias in their natural setting.



Albert Ecke, a German who arrived in Los Angeles in 1900, began to cultivate them outdoors for sale at markets. Ecke's family developed & patented a grafting method to produce a bushier plant rather than the sparse, weedy look of the natural poinsettia. Over the next 90 years, his descendants developed over 500 patents & developed a genius marketing plan that included shipping free plants to TV studios at Christmas in order to cultivate the holiday association in people's minds. As a result, they held a virtual monopoly on the world poinsettia market until the 1990s when their grafting method was independently discovered & published by a university researcher, opening the door for competitors to join the marketplace. (See [Patently Poinsettia](#) for more.)



Dogwood Poinsettia
(*Euphorbia coranstra*)

The Hamilton Spectator recently featured an [article](#) about recent & future poinsettia developments, including new colours & hybridizing with the rare, summer-blooming, white Dogwood Poinsettia (*Euphorbia coranstra*) – “a milestone in the history of the poinsettia” – to produce smaller, more floriferous plants that will grow bushy without extensive pinching, and hold their leaves & bract colour longer.



To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow. — Katherine Hepburn

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Winterizing Evergreens

It might seem counter-intuitive at first – that we need to offer winter protection for the very trees that seem best equipped to withstand it – but evergreens without a strong central trunk (e.g., cedars, and others like yews & junipers, depending on their shape) often suffer lasting damage from heavy snowfalls and ice storms.

Jennifer Arnott of [The Fabulous Garden](http://thefabulousgarden.com) offers a garden twine solution that's far easier than wrapping in burlap... and far more attractive than the "burlap graveyards" we often see in winter. Check out the full instructions and video on her blog:

<https://thefabulousgarden.com/blog/2017/11/08/preventing-cedars-snow-ice-damage/>



Winter Entertainment in Your Own Back Yard

Hoping to attract birds to your yard this winter? Or any time of year? It's not necessarily as easy as it seems at first glance. A handy and concise resource full of advice — particularly about attracting specific types of birds — is available from the

Baltimore Bird Club: <http://baltimorebirdclub.org/by/feed.html>



Environment Hamilton's Climate Change Survey

Environment Hamilton wants to hear from you! A grant from the City of Hamilton's Community Enrichment Fund is funding a survey to measure on a local scale current public understanding of climate issues, and to collect feedback on our primary areas of concern. Findings will be shared with the public, and will be used to inform future workshops and public initiatives such as zoning & transit planning. The online survey can be found at: <http://bit.do/hamontclimate>



You must fail at gardening to master it.