

Garden Games

September is here once again, a month that always makes me think of going back to school. I admit that I enjoyed school, but, I *especially* enjoyed recess. I don't remember a lot of play equipment, but there seemed no end to the fun we could have and the games we could create involving plants.

Some of the games weren't much more than observing plants and interacting with them. Blowing on the ripe seed head of a dandelion to disburse the seeds doesn't take much skill, but pluck the flower too early and the seeds won't fly away, and reach for it too late and the seeds will fall off before you have a chance to puff. Playing with the seeds from a maple tree is equally simple and entertaining. When you throw the double winged seed, the samara, into the air, the spiraling descent can simply be enjoyed, or turned into a race when two or more are playing.

There are some childish plant games that do require some skill and dexterity. When I attended Cambrian Elementary School in San Jose, there were several weeds in the schoolyard that we would search out and use. Cheeseweed is in the Mallow Family and has a fruit shaped like a round of cheese. My playmates and I would carefully peel the leaf-like wrapping off the fruit and then use our fingernails to split it into segments like wedges of cheese. At the perfect state of maturity, you could then pull a string (like a bean string) from around the segment (the carpel) like a zipper, allowing you to open the segment and find the seed inside. Being kids, we would collect and eat the soft green seeds! Another favorite schoolyard weed was the scissors plant. Also known as filaree (what a great common name!) botanically it is *Erodium*, in the Geranium family. Once the flowers were pollinated and petals dropped, seed heads would form that looked somewhat like a cluster of fat needles. We would pick the two most perfect needles, a matched pair, and once again a fingernail would come into play—forming a slit near the middle of the needle. Then a second needle would be slid through the slit, and Ta-Da! you've got a miniature pair of scissors.

Daisy chains are made in a similar fashion to plant scissors, just make a slit in the flower stem to slip another daisy flower stem through and then repeat the process to make a garland of the desired length. And, like the way a chain works, one thought leads to another and a garland of daisies brings to mind the traditional Hawaiian lei. Most leis are strung differently than the daisy chain, since they are usually on a string that runs through the center of the flowers, but both are made with simple materials close to hand, and bring a bit of beauty into our world.

The ubiquitous daisy becomes a fortune teller when used in a game of French origin. The young lover is advised to pick a daisy and pluck off petals reciting "He loves me" then, "He

loves me not” with each petal removed. The words uttered with the last petal are supposed to let you know if your love is returned or not. (I wonder how many of us managed to sneak a quick count ahead to decide if this was, indeed the best flower to be using for the proper outcome?!) The daisy isn’t the only plant used to further the cause of love. The game of kissing under the mistletoe has been popular since the 18th century!

OK, here is one last plant game. Has anyone heard of Conkers? It hasn’t really caught on in the U.S., but in England there are rules to the game and tournaments and even lists of ways to cheat! Conkers is played with the seed of the common horsechestnut, *Aesculus hippocastanum*. This is a completely different plant from our American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*). The seeds do, however, look similar, the horsechestnut just being much bigger. In order to play conkers, one finds the largest, most sound seed possible, drills a hole through it from pole to pole, and threads a string or shoelace through the hole. One combatant dangles his seed in mid-air, and his opponent attempts to swing her conker so that it hits and breaks the dangling seed. Scoring is complicated, using words like ‘none-er’ and ‘one-er’, and methods of cheating include baking the conker or soaking or boiling it in vinegar. My first glimpse into the world of conkers came when an English friend delightedly gathered some of our native buckeye seeds (*Aesculus californica*) to send to his children in England. The seeds, much larger than horsechestnut conkers, were sure to guarantee victory at the game!

~Nancy Schramm

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