

A botanical diaspora

The botanical images featured in the wall murals were taken in two places that frame my Italo-Canadian identity. On the left is the pomegranate, which I scanned in my family's village (Montottone), in the province of Le Marche on the Adriatic coast of Italy. On the right is a wild apple tree (covered in LDD caterpillars), scanned on our property in the Pretty River Valley in Ontario. At first glance, these two images might seem to represent these two places, but digging deeper, one discovers that pomegranates are not native to Italy, nor are apples native to Canada. Pomegranates originate in what is now modern-day Iran and Afghanistan. The fruit spread in ancient times and is often seen as a symbol of fertility and abundance. There is a famous Botticelli painting of the Madonna surrounded by a chorus of angels, in which she and the Christ child cradle a pomegranate. In Christian iconography, it is considered a symbol of Christ's Passion. Apples were introduced to Canada by French settlers, first planted in orchards in Nova Scotia in the early 1600s. Wild apples originated in Central Asia and eventually made their way to Europe.

Sandro Botticelli. *Virgin and Child with Angels (Madonna of the Pomegranate)*, circa 1487. The Uffizi.

https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/pomegranate_madonna_botticelli

The LDD caterpillars (commonly known as the spongy moth) in the apple image deserve special mention. This invasive species was first detected in Ontario in the late 1960s. The population goes through cyclical outbreaks about every seven years. In 2021, they seemed to be everywhere in our valley and were, in fact, responsible for defoliating over 580,000 hectares of forest in Ontario, killing many trees. Warmer winters (caused by climate change) also aid their proliferation and northern movement.

That plants migrate, or that humans have purposely introduced favoured plants (for food or beauty), is not new. Sometimes human and plant diasporas are connected. The common plantain, known as the "white man's footstep," has thrived in North America in areas disturbed by European colonization, following in its wake. Yet as we walk through forests and gaze at landscapes, we often take for granted what we see and fail to ask ourselves where these plants came from and how they got here. With climate change, we know that plants are moving faster than ever, and not always by our choice or design. The impact of these new migrations is still being studied. As climates warm, plants (as well as insects and animals) are migrating from south to north. A botanical diaspora is at hand.

My family moved to Canada (Hamilton, Ontario) in the 1950s. Like thousands of Italians who came after WWII, my parents were looking to build a better life. They came from poor farming families and owned nothing of their own. Their families were sharecroppers, earning their daily bread from what they could grow on land owned by a seigneur. Each year, they split the land's harvest with him. This system dates to medieval times (known as serfdom) and served to keep some wealthy while most remained dependent and living in subsistence. This exploitative system is well presented in the film *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018), written and directed by Alice Rohrwacher. Wheat was a key crop, providing the staples of life: bread and pasta. In the image *Family Harvest*, a rare vintage black-and-white photograph (taken in the early 1950s) depicts my grandparents, two uncles, and my aunt hard at work harvesting wheat. My grandmother is filling my grandfather's glass with something (which I assume to be wine). It was a hard life. After they immigrated to Canada, my grandmother wrote a letter to my aunt (who remained in Italy), in which she said she couldn't believe that all one had to do to turn on a stove was push a button.

That the lives of people and plants are deeply entwined may not seem obvious. We are no longer directly connected to the land for our daily sustenance as my grandparents were. Few of us grow or forage for food or feel the immediate effects of a changing climate. But the evidence and disastrous effects are all around us. As botanist Lyn Baldwin so aptly shares – “In North America direct knowledge of organisms in their environment has been in severe decline for more than 50 years.” And she asks a critical follow up question, “How can we hope to save what we don't know.”¹

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¹ Lyn Baldwin, *Drawing Botany Home: A Rooted Life* (Rocky Mountain Books, 2023), 13.