

# The Changing face of Kamloops in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Recently held political forums have frequently posed the following question to aspiring politicians, "What do you see the future holding for Kamloops in the next millenium?" While the respondents voice technological, social and economic changes, one aspect that has not been recognized is how our natural environment and viewsapes might be different in the next century. We all are aware of the impact that a few noxious weeds such as knapweed have made in the latter decades of this century, but little attention has been paid to the future results of the spread of foreign trees and shrubs just now starting to make their impact felt.

The natural face of Kamloops is slowly changing before our eyes. Within the present generation, the native flora of pine and poplar could very well be supplanted in many areas by invaders from other parts of North America and from Asia. These non-indigenous trees and shrubs were initially planted by past and present residents of the Thompson Valley to augment the natural flora of our area, to provide reminders of where some of our ancestors came from, and finally to provide herbs and cooking enhancements.

It will have been noticed by any keen observer travelling the highways and back-roads of our area that many of these trees and shrubs have taken a firm foothold within the last few decades. Some are confined to the borders of irrigated areas; others thrive within the riparian zones of our streams and rivers. Those that are more hardy and drought tolerant sprout in our inhospitable arid and alkaline soils.

The first of these non-native plants that was introduced by our earliest pioneers is the Manitoba Maple (*Acer negundo*). Also known as Box elder or Ashleaf maple, it is unique to the Canadian Prairie provinces. Many of the early homesteaders came from the plains of the US and Canada, and this maple was often planted as a welcome shade tree around houses and barns. Some of the stands of these maples around early farms and ranches have reached diameters of up to 60 cm. or more. The mouth of Peterson Creek where it empties into the South Thompson has many of these maples established in it's riparian zone. The wood is quite soft, light and weak, and branches often break off in windstorms. It's leaves are unique for a maple as they are compounded and resemble an ash, hence one of it's alternative names. It has been frequently planted beyond it's natural range, and readily seeds itself on disturbed soils. It naturalizes on the banks of streams and the edges of irrigated fields. It is easy to grow, survives in most soils, and is tolerant to frost and drought.



It's seeds are an important source of winter food for birds and small animals, but unfortunately it also harbours a docile and smelly insect commonly called a Maple Bug. This insect delights in invading the closest domiciles and making obnoxious nuisances of themselves.

The Russian Olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*) may be thought to be a relative newcomer to the South Thompson Valley. However, an early pioneer of Barnhartvale, Edward (Toddy) Pratt, pointed out



to the writer in the early 70s the location of a former homestead on the north bank of the South Thompson River east of Pritchard where he claimed the first Russian Olive was planted before the turn of the last century. Over the years, this foreigner has established itself further and further west, now reaching Kamloops proper. It is rarely, if ever, found east of this location. It has seeded itself by drifting with the current of the river and by birds transporting its fruit. It is now primarily confined to the riparian zone of the South Thompson, but is also making inroads as far afield as upper Barnhartvale. Along with the Siberian Elm, it has established itself on both sides of the east Trans Canada Highway and the CPR right-of-way. It must be hand cut on a regular basis to ensure the integrity of the highway and railway shoulders. It

is a relatively small tree native to Europe and Western Asia and has been planted in North America for its attractive grey foliage and its tolerance to salty soils. The flowers are quite fragrant, however the fruits are disappointingly dry and unpalatable. The south bank of the river opposite Skelly's old orchard has a well established naturally seeded grove of these trees that have established themselves over the past two decades.

The Siberian or Chinese Elm (*Ulmus pumila*) rivals the Russian Olive in its adaptability to Kamloops conditions of drought and alkaline soils. It is appearing throughout the Kamloops area in inhospitable areas where only sagebrush and rabbit bush presently grow, and even the Russian Olive finds too harsh. This elm is a medium sized tree native to south-east Asia, and thrives in most soils under extremely adverse conditions. It is frequently planted in North America for hedges and wind-breaks. It is often considered an intrusive pest or weed, and is fond of propagating from seed in the cracks of sidewalks and driveways. In areas in which it has been allowed to develop, and where other trees find conditions too harsh, this elm can provide welcome shade to a walker in the middle of a Kamloops summer. The far eastern portions of Ord Road and the adjacent areas of 8th Street have some examples that are doing quite well in very arid conditions.



During and after the building of the CPR, our Chinese pioneers brought in one of their native shrubs to cultivate in Kamloops' Chinatown. That area between the Overlander Bridge and the Lotto Building on West Victoria saw many Chinese residents and merchants established. One of the shrubs imported by the early Chinese was the Barbary Wolf Berry (*Lycium barbarum*). This interesting shrub or bush is used by some in our community as an herb and a flavouring for foods and soups. Known as Kukoshi to the Japanese, Gou Qi Zi to the Chinese and Kugicha to the

Koreans, it is native to Tibet. The tender shoots



and leaves are used for soups, and the fresh or dried berries and the dried root bark have many applications as a herb. It is used to treat diabetes, purportedly lowers blood sugar, blood pressure and cholesterol, and one Chinese study intimates that it is an effective treatment for melanoma and cancer of the colon, lung or kidney. It was originally confined to the area at the south end of the Overlander Bridge, however it has now naturally spread to the Powers Addition and Mission Flats Road area and somewhat beyond. It forms dense impenetrable thickets of stems that droop over from a height of up to 4 metres. These stands provide cover for birds and small animals, and

are sometimes cultivated as ornamentals in some of the areas that it has volunteered to come up on its own.

The rapid spread of these non-indigenous trees and shrubs is gradually changing the natural face of Kamloops and its immediate surrounding area. At present there does not seem to be naturally occurring disease or insects that would curtail their spread to Thompson valley below Kamloops or, indeed, into the lower Fraser basin.



Unfortunately, with the possible exception of the wolfberry, there does not seem to be an economic value to these permanent visitors. In the case of the Manitoba Maple, it already hosts an obnoxious insect. Will the others harbour their own little

surprises for us as the century progresses? One only has to look at the growing patterns of the Russian Olive with its branches close to the ground and the wolfberry with its dense thickets of dead stems to think about the brush fires of California. Across from the Public Works Yard on Mission Flats Road is a stand of the wolfberry that is partially winter killed and holds considerable fuel for wild fires.

If you combine the natural present spread of these species with the progressive changes in our climate bringing increased precipitation to this area, Kamloops and its environs could look very different to our descendants in the next Century, than it did to our ancestors and the pioneers of the former Century.