

Beware the Interloper!

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For several years running I had either never seen, or was simply unaware of, an interloper in my indigo garden. I grow Japanese indigo, *tadeai*. It does amazingly well in my garden in Northern California. A few years ago, I noticed what I thought to be simply one more variation, of the several versions, of this dye plant. It has long, spindly leaves and a dark spot in the middle of each. What caught my eye was not the leaf shape but the fact that it always bloomed earlier than any of its sisters. I checked with friends in Japan, and they assured me that it is *tadeai*, but not used for dyeing. By *tadeai*, I assumed they meant *Polygonum tinctorium*. It turns out it is *Polygonum*, just not *tinctorium*.

Since they were so easy to spot, I harvested all I could find that year and tried several tests: First, the simple rub test (taking a leaf and rubbing it against piece of white silk). I got no more than grass stains. Next, I tried drying the leaves. The leaves I've been using for dyeing dried to a rich, deep aqua. The interloper dried to a greenish-brown. And, before giving up, I tried fermenting each to see if I could realize any pigment from the uninvited guest, and this test, too, came up negative. (It does give nice yellows with a mordant.)

OK, that was enough evidence to tell me that I don't want this plant in my garden. Since that time, I have ruthlessly banned it from my presence, and having developed this passion to purge, I have started noticing it across a wide territory, far from my home.

As it happens, and what prompted this article, Dustin Kahn (board member of Fibershed) contacted me about a problem an individual was having with her garden bed. She purchased seeds through me, but what came up in all its bold-faced audacity was *only* the long-leafed interloper. Frustrated by not getting the results she expected from *tadeai*, Kori ---, a plant biologist, was consulted and she identified the crop as *P. maculosa*, not *tinctorium*. And just as this correspondence was going on, John Brittnacher, biologist and part of the indigo study referenced elsewhere in this edition of TRJ, wrote to me telling me that Himalayan knotweed had appeared amongst his chosen and promptly invited to leave. This would seem to be a problem that we, as a community, haven't discussed much.

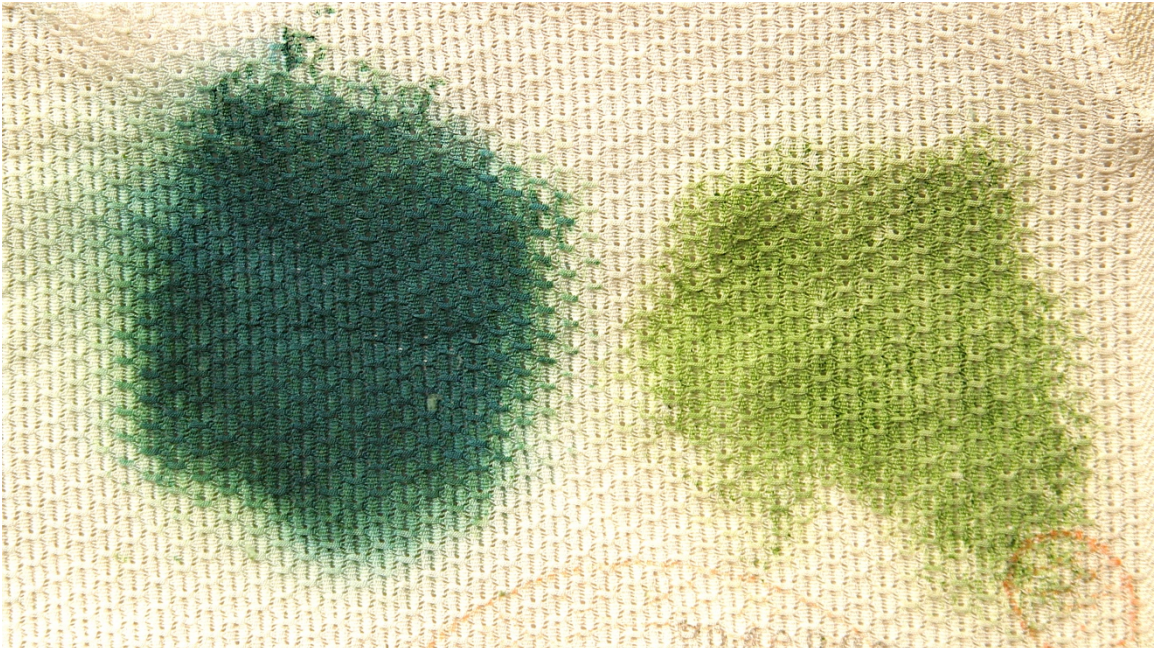
Democrat, Republican, or Independent, do not suffer this fiend to propagate amongst the innocent.

To recap: The interloper has long narrow leaves. There is a much darker spot in the center of the leaf. The general growth structure is the same but tends to branch more than unmolested *tinctorium* and is more spindly. In my garden, it begins blooming as early as mid-July, whereas the sanctioned *tadeai* never blooms before mid-August.

Action: When spotted, promptly remove and destroy.



Persicaria tinctoria, above
Persicaria maculosa, below (the *maculosa* will also have dark thumbprint-like spot
in the middle of the leaf)



Persicaria leaves rubbed directly on the silk. *Tincoria* on the left, *maculosa* on the right.

And while I'm on my soapbox, this is just a reminder: *P. tinctorium* seeds are only reliably viable for one year. Never hold them over thinking you'll get them in the ground next season. When making bread I always start my yeast in a separate bowl and make sure it is robust before adding it to the other ingredients. With same concept in mind, it is always a good idea to start your seeds in a shallow tray and transplant them once you see they are doing well.