

Pushing Up Yucca...And Other Traditional Cemetery Plants

by Rachel Black

Ah, nature! What a resilient creature! If left to her own devices, she would gladly reclaim human civilization as we know it. I'm sure most of you can identify with the annual summer war on the lawn. Imagine letting the yard go for a season or two. It doesn't take long for the weeds and grass to grow high enough to cover walks, birdbaths and other yard items. Unfortunately this is exactly what happens to so many of our older cemeteries. They are falling victim to nature's ever-reaching tendrils.

That is why the first thing everyone wants to do when undertaking a cemetery restoration project is to 'clear the brush'. This is indeed a noble effort and, admittedly, a very important first step. You can't fix what you don't know you have and you can't determine what you have until you clear the area. However, a word of caution is warranted before such plans are implemented.

Before you begin clearing away the jungle, step back and take a good, long look at what the jungle is made of. You may find that several of the plants are meant to be there and are as much a part of the historic nature of the cemetery as the gravestones they so consummately conceal. The majority of old cemeteries still have many of the traditional plantings growing in them today. These are plants that, when intentionally placed in the cemetery, symbolize the customs and beliefs of those buried there. Often they can tell you as much about the community's social and religious ways as the iconography on the stones.

Every plant has a special meaning to the person who planted it. It's hard to say exactly what that particular plant meant to the planter but each one also has a more widely accepted meaning as well. Naturally, the vast majority of the plants found in cemeteries symbolize eternal life. Others represent everlasting love, achievement or completion (in life) and peace.

The most common plants seen in cemeteries in the Appalachian region are periwinkle, vinca, yucca, cedar and other types of evergreen, holly, and lilies. If left to their own devices, many of these will naturalize and spread over the entire cemetery and beyond. Periwinkle and vinca are the worst culprits. They are flowering ground covers that do just that-cover the ground. Likewise, lilies are quite prodigious and can take over an entire cemetery in a matter of years. Yucca is a spiky, cactus-like plant that looks as if it would be much more at home in the desert than the hills of West Virginia. It too can spread over the whole cemetery if given the opportunity. The evergreens and holly tend to stay where planted a little better. Although holly can spread, it doesn't spread with the wild abandon that the groundcovers and lilies do.

So, before you start clearing the cemetery, grab a tree and plant guidebook and head for the site. Try to identify as much of the vegetation as possible and tag the ones that fit the 'traditional' bill. Some thinning might be in order but try to leave as many as possible. It will add a whole new dimension to your finished product.

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