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“Any action taken in defense of the environment is justifiable”

I hope you will indulge me this month as I step away from horticultural myths to discuss what has happened to me and my colleagues in the last few weeks at the Center for Urban Horticulture. As many of you already know, our offices and labs were firebombed on May 21, 2001 by representatives of the Earth Liberation Front.

These so-called “eco”terrorists are nothing more than self-righteous, intellectually challenged delinquents looking for opportunities to destroy anything that doesn’t fit their narrow worldview. History is filled with similar organizations of misfits who have violently imposed their views on the rest of society. The Earth Liberation Front, cutely acronymed as “ELF”, adds the patina of pseudoscience to justify their self-righteous actions when in fact they understand little, if anything, of the work they find so objectionable.

The poplar breeding program that was targeted by these terrorists has been described thoroughly in the media; it’s enough to say that Toby Bradshaw practices hybridization in much the same way as Gregor Mendel did with his pea plants in the 19th century. The rest of us – the “collateral damage” – have lost time, materials, equipment, and personal items collected throughout our academic careers. I’ve lost leaf samples and equipment that I was using to establish whether anthocyanins – the red pigments found in leaves and other tissues – are important in drought tolerance. One of my students has lost plant samples from her research in identifying the best ways to control English ivy in parks and other natural areas. UW programs in rare plant conservation and ecological restoration, and WSU programs in urban gardening, have also been severely impacted.

The damage to our educational and research programs is tangible and significant, but excused by the perpetrators as necessary for the greater good. (It’s interesting to note that an ELF spokesperson recently characterized the collateral damage as “regrettable”: so did Timothy McVeigh). How has this firebombing in the name of environmental defense really affected the environment? Here are some facts:

- The fire added more pollution to the atmosphere
- Trees and shrubs, many of them specimen plants, were destroyed by the fire or during demolition
- Firefighters required large amounts of water to quench the blaze (and in a drought year, yet)
- The trucks and other heavy equipment needed for salvage and demolition pollute the atmosphere and compact the turf and garden soil they drive over
- Landfill space is consumed with the remains of our demolished building and unsalvageable belongings
- Many cardboard boxes and paper packing materials were needed to salvage the remains of offices and laboratories

- Bottles of cleaning solutions and paper towels were and are being consumed as we clean our belongings
- Energy inefficient trailers are our living quarters until a new building is constructed
- University resources have been diverted towards increased security and restoration at a cost to other programs

As I arrange my temporary quarters behind our greenhouses, I am tired and angry as I think about the rebuilding that will be required by our research faculty, our educational outreach program, and by the WSU Master Gardeners. And ironically, as I sit wiping the soot from my lecture notes, puffs of cottonwood seed waft through my trailer, a poignant reminder that hybridization occurs naturally and continually in our evolutionarily dynamic environment.

Please note: this column was written when the author was employed at the University of Washington. For more information, please visit Dr. Chalker-Scott's web page at <http://www.theinformedgardener.com>.