

Once in a Lifetime

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A bamboo plant that blooms once in a century has begun to flower around the world. The phenomenon is causing great excitement among botanists, who have been unable to identify properly this particular variety, known as the umbrella bamboo, because the blossoms essential for its classification just haven't been around. Scientists need the information to propagate the species, which is one of the most useful to man.

But such a blossoming strikes the public fancy as well. A flower that reveals itself in the stately rhythms of the cosmos and that can be seen just once in a lifetime — and only if one's life span crosses the bamboo's blooming — is an extraordinary, universally appealing event. It is made more so by the fact that these blossoms are responding to a genetic clock that governs the entire species. All the plants will bloom at once, and then they all will die, as if Wagner had composed their life cycle.

The least that one expects from such a script is a

gaudy display, the kind of happening that would inspire the erection of viewing platforms by the Japanese. But although nature doesn't like to be fooled, she's capable of fooling us: the umbrella bamboo blossoms are so small and covered with green scales that they can barely be seen with the naked eye; the viewing parties will have to crowd around microscopes.

So nature-watchers, we're sorry to say, will be deprived of a special kind of social event — communal bloom-watching. An example of such observations — the social occasion of the year in one small New England town, second only to the Fourth of July — has always been the annual appearance of the night-blooming cereus, in all its pale lunar splendor. On a summer evening, most of the town gathers around the hardware store for the celebration. It is a moment of esthetic pleasure touched with awe, and a welcome reminder of the sort of growth and beauty that hold the troubled world at blossom's length.

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