

The Academy's Wild Flowers

by John Gould

Tom Cone, who teaches biology at Andover, once described flowers as "bullseyes." In so doing, he was speaking functionally as well as metaphorically, for this is a flower's big job: to give a pollinator a target to hit. Species can be very clever about this. The cleft pouch of the Pink Moccasin-flower scrapes insects clean as they squeeze into the pink lung of a blossom. In fact, the color, shapes, and odor of each flower selects the who, when, and how of pollination. Male and female Carrion-flowers, greenish and inconspicuous and smelling like decaying meat, have chosen flies as their re-productive go-betweens.

Emily Dickinson, who was a poet, spoke of flowers in more subjective terms than Tom Cone, as creatures inspiring "ecstasy": *Flowers—Well—if anybody
Can the ecstasy define—
Half a transport—half a trouble—
With which flowers humble men...*

I worry a bit about using Emily Dickinson's words about botany, but not because she didn't understand the function of flowers. She was in fact an educated botanist, and some of her poems about flowers can only be understood with reference to the specific blossom. In "I could bring you Jewels," for instance, she describes "this Topaz—And his Emerald Swing"— which is clearly a depiction of Jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*): a bright orange-yellow blossom hanging down from a green stem. My concern with Emily Dickinson is that a good many people want to lump her into their stereotype of floral poets — little old ladies who gush mush. Those people are dead wrong; many good poets derive inspiration from botany. I agree with Dickinson: there is an ecstasy about wild flowers, and it can be, I think, integrally related to a botanical investigation of them.

A bit of personal history: in the summer of 1976 I bicycled across the country. Because of my bent-over posture, much of my scenery turned out to be the wild flowers growing at the side of the road, confetti scattered along my path. As they became less and less familiar (and as I became more interested in finding things to stop and look at— especially going up hills!), I started photographing them. I was surprised to discover upon my return home that I could not easily learn specifically what these creatures were; I had been too ignorant of what distinguished one species from another, and many of my photographs had missed an identifying aspect of the flowers.

Thus I became interested in wild flowers, in what made them what they were and what made them beautiful. After a while, I began to see that the specificity was inextricable from the aesthetics—that the three-part structure of a Purple Trillium, say, helped to define both the flower and its beauty. In the poem quoted above, Dickinson moves towards a suggestion of exactly this sort of observation, that a flower's beauty may be

fully understood only by the insect that knows the flower more specifically than any botanist—or any gushy poet—ever can:

*Butterflies from St. Domingo
Cruising round the purple line—
Have a system of aesthetics—
Far superior to mine.*

I decided to look around the PA campus to see what's growing wild here. I tried to be reasonably careful. I kept notebooks. I used three reference books extensively: Roger Tory Peterson's *Field Guide to Wildflowers*, M.L. Fernald's *Gray's Manual of Botany*, and Stewart K. Harris's *Flora of Essex County, Massachusetts*. I didn't try to be particularly exhaustive. I don't know much about trees, so I left them out, as well as the sedges, the mosses and the like. I didn't even get all the wild flowers. My total was 128. There are many more species of them around; plenty of work remains for next year, for me or others.

One problem I faced concerns the number of gardens, past and present, on the campus. A number of plants appear on this list that have no business growing in Essex County. Others do belong in this area, but it is doubtful that the Good Lord set them in the particular beds where I found them. I divided the list, then, into two parts: plants that occur naturally where I saw them, and plants that I am sure were introduced. The Large White Trillium is not a native east of the Berkshires, but it grows in the woods behind Greenough House on Hidden Field Road. Although there is a stand of Yellow Trout-Lily (which is native to Essex County) beside Kellogg House on Phillips Street, that area was clearly once a garden, and other species have been introduced there. It seems likely that this plant was at some time introduced there as well.

It seemed to me that the list might well be educational in several ways. Science students might want to study certain plants or environments. Art students might be interested in working with local flora. Students of Emily Dickinson might want to see what Jewelweed looks like, so they might understand her poem—or even better, might write their own.

The spring produced some vivid sites/sights. In April, with Skunk Cabbage in leaf, Scilla covered the back yard of Blanchard House with sky blue, like a mirage. Very early in the season, a slope behind Junior House became festooned with Bloodroot, a member of the poppy family, whose white showy flowers grow up from its cupped, light green, deeply-cut leaves. The northeast corner of the cemetery was carpeted with Confederate Violets, white with a center blaze of violet. In May I discovered the lot between Will Hall and Kellogg House, where Trout-lily, Purple Trillium, and Myrtle—all doubtless planted there by a hand now long dead—grow abundantly along a small, rich stream. This site is so attractive and fertile that it has recently been turned into a small wild flower reserve.

The woods in the Sanctuary have been so carefully groomed in the past that wild flowers have been inhibited. I found only one blossom of Goldthread, a plant that is normally exceedingly gregarious. I expected Pink Moccasin-flowers in abundance because of the acid, piney woods. In fact I found few. Of course the Pink, Fragrant, and Flame Azaleas and the Mountain and Sheep Laurels altogether create an extraordinary walk—but I came away feeling that I had walked a garden path rather than a woodland trail.

There are some lovely gardens on campus containing native American flora. Phelps House, Sides House, Greenough House all added to the list. I am sure that there are others I have not yet seen, may see next year.

In the late summer and fall, the composites—the daisy family—rule the fields and woods: goldenrods, asters, hawkweeds, everlastings. One of the most beautiful of the asters (which are normally a rather unkempt ragged lot, for my money) is the New England Aster, which grows in large quantity at the edge of Rafferty Field.

And so comes winter, and the flowers are gone for a time. I have enjoyed making the list. It has made me feel better. You can imagine how pleased I was to learn that it may have made me a better person, as well. Annie Dillard wrote in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, "I suspect that the real moral thinkers end up, wherever they may start, in botany. We know nothing for certain, but we seem to see that the world turns upon growing, grows toward growing, and growing green and clean."

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