

IN THE SOURLANDS
Summer Wildflowers
By Rachel Mackow

I'm sometimes asked how I learned the names of our abundant summer wildflowers. "Did you go to school for this?" If you consider exploring wild areas, accompanying experienced naturalists in the field, and reading plant identification books "going to school", the answer is "yes".

Wildflower walks are a type of language immersion class. Consider them a safari where the wild things stand still patiently as you flip through a book figuring out their names.

Use your senses. Start with the easy one - sight - to determine flower color, leaf shape and arrangement, and petal count. Then, touch for leaf and stem texture, excepting poison ivy, of course! Listen to the humming bees and snap of dragonflies. Smell sweet and not so sweet flowers and aromatic foliage. Taste if you really know your edible plants! After hours in the field and forest the sense of intuition kicks in, too.

Walking from one end of the Sourlands to the other, an observant explorer might encounter many summer wildflowers. Let's start -- park the car, hurry across the parking lot and mowed grass, grab a map at the kiosk, and head to the woodland trail. Now, it's time to slow down. Copies of *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide* and *Peterson's Field Guide to Wildflowers* are in your bag.

The trail ascends quickly. The soils are rich but well-drained. Black oaks tower above the stony ground. Beneath them is a colony of five foot tall wildflowers. The blooms look like miniature white fireworks along a spire. The foliage is located far below the raceme of flowers at about knee height.

Your books tell you it's black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*). Its common name arises from its long-lived, dark taproot that has an equally deep history as a medicinal herb. Bugbane is another common name, confirmed by the flowers' pungent smell. If you're inclined to more magical common names, black cohosh is also aptly called fairy candles.

The colony of cohosh thins as the trail begins to descend. Ahead, the tree canopy opens, and the soil is moist and springy. The calls of goldfinches mark your arrival at the edge of the woods. The birds harvest seeds from a large drift of brilliantly yellow blooms. The foliage of this wildflower is rough, scratchy. Each leaf is paired with another along the stalk and is slightly toothed with a short stem, which confirms this is Paleleaf sunflower (*Helianthus strumosus*) and not another annual sunflower.

Beyond the wood's edge is a meadow - this is where the summer wildflowers shine. This particular Sourlands meadow is moist. Upon encountering swamp milkweed,

New York ironweed, or Joe Pye weed, you wonder what relation they have to "weeds".

Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), like other native milkweeds, is host to numerous insects. We might find the black, white, and yellow striped monarch caterpillar, or the black, white, and orange milkweed tussock caterpillar eating milkweed.

The royal purple, deer resistant New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*) towers over the swamp milkweed. You recognize this wildflower from a few wet, abandoned hay fields. Its lance-shaped leaves are dark green. In the hot sun, a great spangled fritillary collects nectar from the clusters of flowers.

Nearby is an even taller yet wildflower with abundant clusters of small pale purple blooms arranged in a way that looks like a balloon. They're visited by dozens of tiger swallowtail butterflies. You touch the plant, noticing how a faint, whitish dust is the stem, similar to that on blueberry fruit. Another "weed" the book tells you, Joe Pye weed (*Eupatorium fistulosum*).

This is hour two of this wildflower expedition, and you're completely immersed interpreting the language of plants. You follow the flight of a shiny green bee who lands on a white flower that looks similar to Joe Pye weed. Could it be boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*)?

The sun is hot on the back of your neck. The heat tells you its noon, there's no need or desire to check the clock or the phone. For a brief moment, you ponder snapping a photo and sharing it. Instead, the trail calls, focusing your attention, honing your senses. You feel a bit wild. Back to the safari, more wildflowers await your discovery.