

COMMON WILDFLOWERS OF FORT NECESSITY

By Doug Hutter

Hoping to extend our visitors' natural history horizons, we decided to introduce a common wildflower guide for park personnel. The following descriptions are based on the picture-matching approach in Peterson's First Guide to Wildflowers and Stupka's Wildflowers in Color. Scientific names are included to avoid confusion, and interesting facts may be useful during visitor contacts/interpretation. Page numbers are given for the above mentioned references for illustration. Species not native to our area are designated by the term "alien."

1. Wild carrot, Queen Anne's Lace (alien)

Daucus carota

This weed was introduced from Eurasia and is distributed throughout most of the United States. Some authorities say that this species is the original of the cultivated carrot, for, by cultivation and selection, roots as fleshy and as large as those of the garden carrot were obtained. It thrives in dry fields, old meadows, pastures, and waysides. The umbel (umbrella) of flowers forms a lace-like pattern. There is usually one purple or pink flower in the center of this flower cluster. Wild carrot tea may be used as a stimulant, diuretic, and mild laxative. The plant also contains an oil that smells like turpentine.

Flowering season: May - Oct.

Peterson, p. 48

Stupka, p. 74

2. Black-eyed Susan

Rudbeckia hirta

Members of the Daisy or Composite Family have two different types of flowers, as this wild flower clearly shows. The golden-yellow flowers are called ray flowers, while the chocolate-colored center is composed of disk flowers. Also, note the hairy stem and leaves. It grows in dry fields, roadsides, open woods, and waysides. This opportunist apparently arrived from the Midwest as an impurity in the seed of crop plants.

This flower is a biennial, thus requiring two years to complete its' life cycle. The seeds sprout in late summer, winter over as young plants, and flower the next year.

Flowering season: June - Oct.

Stupka, p. 126

Peterson, p. 112

3. Blue vervain

Verbena hastata

This tall plant found in damp places has branching spikes of small 5-petaled flowers. These small flowers bloom a few at a time as they advance toward the tip of the spike. Also, notice the 4-sided grooved stem.

Flowering season: July - Sept.
Peterson, p. 316

4. Black cohosh, bugbane

Cimicifuga racemosa

These flowers are attractive, but malodorous. The tall, wand-like cluster of white flowers is easily recognized in woodlands, not woodland fringe. The petals and sepals (outer set of floral leaves) fall early, leaving a cluster of "feathers." The leaflets are subdivided into groups of three. Height ranges from 3-8 feet. Regarded by the Indians as helpful for snakebite.

Flowering season: Mid-June - Sept.
Peterson, p. 60
Stupka, p. 34

5. Hollow Joe-pye-weed

Eupatorium fistulosum

This species occurs in wet thickets and meadows. The pink-purple flower clusters are rounded upward or convex. There are usually six leaves in a whorl. The stem is smooth, with a whitish coating and trace of purple.

Flowering season: Mid-July - Sept.
Peterson, p. 298

6. Canada thistle (alien)

Cirsium arvense

Our most common thistle with small, tubular, fragrant, reddish-purple flower heads. This weed occurs in all crops, pastures, meadows, and waste places throughout the northern half of the United States and Canada. The seeds are a source of food for goldfinches and sparrows; however, this plant has no favorable qualities as far as man is concerned. In fact, this noxious weed is outlawed in 37 states because it takes pastures, hayfields, and even cultivated fields. Fortunately, the plants are dioecious; that is, there are male and female plants, and unless they are near, no fertile seeds will be developed by the females. But the thistle is capable of reproducing without seeds, for the long, burrowing side roots can start a colony quite well. The Greek word "arvense" means "of the cultivated field."

Flowering season: July - Sept.
Peterson, p. 304
Stupka, p. 130

7. Chicory (alien)

Cichorium intybus

These violet-blue showy flowers are also white and occasionally pink. A member of the Composite Family, the single large blossom is actually a head of extremely small flowers. These blooms generally close during midday. This plant, widely naturalized from Europe, is used as a hay crop there, and the farmers declare it superior to alfalfa. European farmers are able to produce more hay from a chicory field than from the best field of alfalfa.

Chicory is also cultivated for its roots and leaves. Blanched leaves are used in salads, as is endive, chicory's brother or sister. The roots are ground, roasted, and used as a coffee substitute, stretcher, and flavorer.

Flowering season: June - Oct.
Peterson, pp. 92, 362
Stupka, p. 131

8. Common milkweed

Asclepias syriaca

These fragrant, lavender flowers arise out of leaf and stem joints on a simple stalk. The seed pods are grayish, hairy, and appear "warty" from which the silky parachutes (seeds) are released in fall. Children can make doll pillows from the silk of the pods, or empty the pods and make baby cradles. Also, decorative birds can be made from the pods.

However, round clusters of flowers may act as mortal traps to insects seeking their nectar. Insects attempt to get nectar from the cups that make up what is called the crown of the flower. These cups are smooth and an insect's foot invariably slips and lands in the opening between two of the cups. In that slit lies the stamen (male floral organ), whose pollen may never contact the female floral organ (pistil) unless an insect's foot enters this trap. If the insect is capable of removing its' foot, two little bags of pollen will ride away on the insect's leg to another flower, adhering to the tip of the pistil when the insect's foot slips again on the cups. If the insect is not strong enough to remove its' leg, it hangs there until it dies with the flower part.

The monarch butterfly, also called the milkweed butterfly, larvae (caterpillars) feed upon the milkweed. The chrysalis (hard-shelled pupa) is an inch long, light green in color, and dotted with gold. The butterfly emerges a complete insect after a two week pupa stage.

Sprouts up to eight inches high are cooked like asparagus. In fact, the sprouts, leaves, flower buds, and seedpods are edible once the milky sap is first removed by boiling.

Flowering season: July - Aug.
Peterson, p. 294

9. Tall meadow-rue

Thalictrum polygamum

This common plant of lower elevations may reach 3-8 feet in wet meadows, swamps, and streambanks. While the petals are lacking in these flowers, notice the showy tassels (actually numerous stamens) that are host to many bees, moths, and butterflies all of which fertilize it. Study the flower with a hand lens for interest. The three-lobed, oval-shaped leaflets are light green above and pale below. Other common names are "muskrat weed," and "musquash-weed."

Flowering season: July - Aug.
Peterson, p. 72
Stupka, p. 29

10. Crown vetch (alien)

Coronilla varia

This strapping, branching, perennial occurs in roadsides and waste places. The flowers occur in dense umbels (cloverlike clusters) of pink and white. The standard or upper flattened petal is pink, while the wings are white or purple-tipped. The leaflets are stalkless with a short and small sharp tip.

According to Dr. Mullins at California University of Pennsylvania, crown vetch was hybridized at Penn State. This "Penn State monster" is used extensively for erosion control.

Flowering season: June - Aug.
Peterson, p. 252

11. Hedge bindweed

Convolvulus sepium

The botanical name, Convolvulus sepium, best describes this member of the morning-glory family. Convolvulus, from the Latin verb convolvere, means to entwine, and sepium, from the Latin noun saepes, means hedge.

What is the difference between morning-glories and bindweeds then? Bindweed (genus Convolvulus) and morning-glory (genus Ipomoea) can easily be distinguished by their leaf shapes. The former has arrowhead shaped leaves, while the latter has heart-shaped leaves. The white or pink flowers are funnel-form to bell-shaped, opening at dawn, and closing by noon. They occur in moist areas along roads, in fields, thickets, or streambanks.

Flowering season: May - Sept.
Peterson, p. 12

12. Yarrow (alien)

Achillea millefolium

A common weed, impervious to drought and poor soil, occurring in roadsides, meadows, pastures, and dusty trails. Its fragrant, fernlike leaves are medicinal in nature. The astringent (refers to a substance that contracts vessels) action of the crushed leaves will stop nosebleeds. Its tea, used as a tonic, is said to be a relief from severe colds. The American Indians ground the leaves, steeped them in boiling water, and applied them to wounds, bruises, and burns. In fact, the genus name honors Achilles, who used the plants' healing properties in the Trojan War. The botanical name, Achillea millefolium, means the thousand-leaved plant that Achilles used.

Yarrow's white flower clusters are sometimes confused with the wild carrot; however, its heads of flowers are very small, and are grouped in flat-topped, open, flower clusters.

Flowering season: June - Aug.
Peterson, pp. 44, 298
Stupka, p. 128

13. White clover (alien)

Trifolium repens

Its botanical name, Trifolium repens, is from the Latin meaning the creeping three-leaved plant. Before the flowers bloom, white clover may be identified by its leaflets folded along the salient central vein at night, and by the creeping stems.

This plant grows everywhere in North America and in nearly every country worldwide. Some 75 varieties of clover extend themselves throughout the United States alone. Fortunately, the bacteria associated with the roots of the clovers enrich the soil.

Clover is a preferred food item of deer, black bear, Canada geese, pheasants, turkey, woodchuck (ground hog), rabbit, and many others. Our nuthatches are among the songbirds searching for the seeds also.

Indians ate clover stems, flowers, and leaves both raw and cooked, while some partially dried and smoked the roots. Others enjoyed rolling and dipping them in oil or meat drippings. The blossoms have also been used for cheese and tobacco flavoring, moth repellent, bread, and medicinal tea.

Flowering season: May - Oct.
Peterson, p. 80

14. Ox-eye daisy (alien)

Chrysanthemum leucanthemum

By virtue of its genus name, it is related to the "mums" grown by florists everywhere. The botanical name translated means the white-flowered gold flower. Remember, members of the composite family have two different types of flowers.

The whole plant and flowers are used medicinally in both tea and extract form as a source of home remedies. For example, the tea reputedly acts as an antispasmodic, diuretic, and tonic. It was used for whooping cough, asthma, and nervous excitation. Even lotions can be made and applied externally for wounds and bruises. In Europe and China, the young shoots are enjoyed in salads.

Flowering season: June - Aug.
Peterson, p. 92
Stupka, p. 129

15. Fleabane daisy

Erigeron annuus

The generic name Erigeron refers to the gray appearance of some species. Translated from two Greek words, Erigeron means "soon becoming old," for their seeds ripen shortly after their flowers open.

Seen in almost any field and along roadsides throughout the United States, it blooms by early June but the daisylike flowers can be found throughout summer. The dusty powder from the crumbling, dried leaves, not only spoils a crop of hay, but is said to chase fleas; however, there are no fleas in hay.

Peterson, p. 94

16. St. John's-wort (alien)

Hypericum perforatum

This yellow wildflower has many gold-tipped pinlike stamens (male floral organs.) Note the black dots along the edges of the five-petaled blossoms. Pick a linear-shaped leaf and closely observe the translucent dots. These dots permit only partial light transmission. Conversely, transparent dots allow an object(s) to be clearly seen through them.

St. John's-wort is poisonous to cattle and horses. In fact, human consumption of this plant when flowering may cause skin irritations. In Scandinavia, plants were hung inside the house and at the house entrance to prevent evil spirits in June - the month when witches held nightly celebrations.

Flowering season: June - Sept.
Peterson, pp. 106, 138

17. Common or meadow buttercup (alien)

Ranunculus acris

This well-known species of buttercup occurs in fields, pastures, and meadows everywhere. The blossom has shiny yellow petals and grows on a hairy plant. The basal leaves are deeply dissected.

Naturalized from Eurasia, it is common throughout Canada and most of the United States. If you like butter (or margarine nowadays) a blossom held under the chin will tint your chin with the reflected gold. Do you like butter? It also contains an acrid (sour) juice, that is somewhat poisonous to livestock if eaten.

Flowering season: May - Sept.
Peterson, p. 132

18. Butterfly weed

Asclepias tuberosa

This spectacular milkweed has terminal umbels (umbrellas) of orange flowers. You have probably noticed the countless different butterflies seeking nectar. Remember, the unique flower construction requires the butterfly or bee to pollinate the plant if it partakes of the nectar. In the fall, the slender pods disperse their seeds with silken fluff. In fact, this silken fluff was the temporary subject of USDA tests to determine if it could replace kapok (silky down from the Kapok tree, Ceiba pentandra) in life-preserving equipment.

There are about 100 different species of milkweed. The milky liquid (latex) of broken stems or leaves was used by the Indians to clear warts and ringworm (fungus caused) infections; however, this milkweed is not milky when broken.

Flowering season: July - Sept.
Peterson, p. 208
Stupka, p. 90

19. Narrow-leaved blue-eyed grass

Sisyrinchium angustifolium

This member of the Iris Family, not the Grass Family, has violet-blue flowers scattered through the grasslike foliage. The golden-yellow, six-pointed star in the center of the blossom can be better appraised with a hand lens. Also, the petals are sharp-pointed. So watch out!

Flowering season: May - July
Peterson, p. 326
Stupka, p. 16

20. Culver's root

Veronicastrum virginicum

This tall herb occurs throughout the state in moist meadows. Note the white terminal spike-like flowers. The lance-shaped, finely toothed leaves occur in whorls (circularly arranged round the stem) of 3-6, usually 5.

Flowering season: July - Sept.
Peterson, p. 60