

# VILLAGE VIEW

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Whether you call them weeds or wildflowers, if you live on the cape you're in the right place to become familiar with a myriad of flowering plants that abound without your being aware of their existence. A field guide or a knowledgeable native can help you appreciate the delicate beauty of the wild garden... beauty for the most part going unseen.

Wildflowers require no attention, but looking for and identifying them can greatly enhance your pleasure. Once you begin recognizing these neighbors, you're launched into a new world... a world that surrounds you whenever you walk over uncultivated acreage.

Typical of most wildflowers is their satisfaction with anonymity; these thrive on being ignored. They may grow close to the ground, flourish, bloom and fade, season after season, without artificial watering, fertilizer, cultivation, thinning, plucking or transplanting. They may stretch taller than your head and you may need to look up to find their blossoms. In either case they seem to blend so perfectly with other plants, they escape notice.

One of the earliest spring wildflowers to bloom is the mayflower, also called trailing arbutus. Its rounded heart-shaped leaves are evergreen; patches grow under pines in light sandy soil. We look for the fragrant pink and white flowers in April and gather only tiny quantities, not only because it takes but a few to fill a warm room with their sweetness, but also because they are a protected species, endangered by careless tearing of vines and destruction of natural habitat.

Those few mayflowers we take are carefully snipped with scissors to insure the vine's tendril roots, clinging shallowly to the soil, remain undisturbed. And when we know of a fine spreading bed, we keep it a secret.

Almost before the mayflowers are gone, the lady's slippers send up their proud stalks from between their two broad leaves. Atop each stalk blooms a single showy flower, a true orchid of our New England woodlands. The moccasin-shaped rosy blossom retains its beauty for several weeks and may often be found where crumbling rotting wood lies beneath mouldering oak leaves and pine needles. We never pick lady's slippers; next year's bloom depends on food stored by this year's flower. Enjoy them where they stand, year after year.

In June when cultivated mountain laurel blooms, its wild cousin, sheep laurel, also flowers. A low shrub which grows abundantly and spreads if undisturbed, wild laurel bears deep pink clusters of flowers. A favorite of Thoreau who wrote of sheep laurel, "I remember with what delight I discovered this flower in dewy mornings. All things in this world must be seen with morning dew on them, must be seen with youthful, early-opened hopeful eyes."

Late June is the season for butter and eggs, an erect plant a few feet high with bright flowers in two shades of yellow, to grow in close clusters. The conspicuous blossoms strongly resemble snapdragons.

Early in July can be found blooming another wildflower, this with the unromantic common name of shinleaf, deriving from an early belief that the leaves, applied to sores or bruises, quickened healing. From a distance at blossomtime, shinleaf resembles lily-of-the-valley, but the white flower found along the top third of its foot-high stalk, are more delicately scented.

Coinciding with shinleaf is blossomtime for pipsissewa (pip-sis'-ee-wah); the name is Indian, of course, and may have survived because the Indians attributed the plant with strength-building powers. Found in sandy soil and semi-shade, the lance-shaped leaves are vary-colored and distinctively marked. Although the plant is seldom more than a few inches tall, its comparatively large blossom is richly fragrant.

Another tiny evergreen common in pine and oak forests is checkerberry or wintergreen. Its leaves are three, thick, waxy, glossy and smooth with no resemblance to those of poison ivy. Young leaves have a pleasant aromatic flavor and make a palatable tea. In the fall its bright red berries are not only edible, but savory. Birds and deer appreciate them too.

No one familiar with the Cape's woodlands can have missed seeing the Indian pipes or ghost flowers. They spring from a ball of matted rootlets and are parasitic, drawing nourishment from decaying vegetable matter. Indian medicine men used this plant to treat eye diseases. It grows from three to eight inches tall and is one of the few plants that cannot produce chlorophyll. The Indian pipe is a true plant in spite of this; its flower has a calyx, corolla, stamens and pistil.

Finally, but certainly far from being the least interesting, we find the wild white azalea. A rangy shrub from three to ten feet high, its leaves are typical of specimen azalea. Late in June or early in July this handsome plant bears fragrant white flowers. So heavy with nectar are the blossoms, they not only smell sweet but are as sticky to touch as a honey-pot. A single twig bearing several blossoms will scent a room with delightful fragrance and last several days.

The wildflowers mentioned are but a tiny example of those to be found on Cape Cod. Most are members of the heath family... a large and varied family of plants. Only the lady's slipper, an orchid, and butter and eggs, a figwort, are members of other families. All have been discovered growing and blooming and reproducing their own kind on a single acre of Cape Cod where pine and oaks abound.

Most are not prolific; you'll find hundreds of blueberry bushes (including several different varieties) for each pipsissewa, each shinleaf, each mayflower patch, each lady's slipper, each butter and eggs, each stand of Indian pipes. But you'll find almost as many checkerberry plants as you will blueberry bushes. If you're lucky, you may find at least one wild azalea on your particular acre.

Or... it's possible your acre won't happen to grow the same wildflowers that pop up unbidden, but ever so welcome and beloved, on mine. Yours may give you bouncing bett-star flowers-- snake violets-- buttercups-- wild morning glory -- Queen Anne's lace-- or milkweed.

It's unimportant which wildflowers grow on your acre of land; the reward is in learning to recognize those that do. Plants growing beyond the borders of our windowboxes, our foundation plantings, our carefully cultivated gardens, belong there; these are the ones to whom the environment belongs. You may think you own it but... truly... the plants do. Long after you and I are gone, and your acreage and mine has passed through the hands of a dozen strangers, the same little weedy wildflowers will poke their spikey leaves through rotting oak leaves and mouldering pine needles. Given the merest chance for survival, they'll still be here long after our progeny have succumbed to whatever lethal dose we deal ourselves.

While we're still around, it's a joyful pastime to get to know our neighbors. They're friendly for the most part and, best of all, they're quiet. There's much to be said for making wildflower identification a pastime, or even a hobby. Some people watch birds; I do myself. Equal enjoyment comes from getting to know the wildflowers.