

Wild About Wild Flowers



Pitcher Plant

Sarracenia purpurea

Flower Stories

Flowers tell stories. The more you get to know wild flowers in our parks and natural spaces, the more secrets they will tell you. To one person the land may look bare. But to one who knows its wild flowering plants, the land is full of life, history and folklore. Once you begin to know Newfoundland's and Labrador's flowers, you will find out other secrets of nature too. Eagle and osprey, bear and caribou, all have relationships with our flowering plants.

Flowers and People

Every vegetable we eat once came from a wild flowering plant. Carrots were bred from Queen Anne's Lace, a wild plant that blooms along our rivers and roadsides in June. Cabbages originally came from a wild plant that flowers on Mediterranean shores. Most of our old cures and many modern medicines have evolved because people cared enough to study the powerful healing properties of wild flowering herbs, and to cultivate the plants for human use.

Celebrating Our Unique Species

Many people think of Newfoundland and Labrador as having an inhospitable landscape. It is true that many of our wild flowers are found here at the ends of their ranges, meaning the land can just barely nourish them. But other northern places in the world celebrate their wild flowers. We are finally beginning to ascribe to our own wild flowers the value they deserve.



Pink Lady's Slipper

Cypripedium acaule

We have many species. Over 1,250 species of vascular plants grow on the island, and Labrador bears additional Arctic species. But our wild flowers are not just numerous. Many of them are unique in the world, due to our very special geography. While the boreal forest forms a dominant habitat, there are sub-habitats across the province. With them come surprises. Some boreal woodland flowers do not grow here, while strange pilgrim flowers from western North America, the Arctic, and coastal Europe, find the niches they need to thrive in our unusual combination of geological and climactic conditions.

Many Landscapes Make Many Flowers

BOREAL WOODLAND: Woodland plants change as you go from high to low lands. Water travels down from the high lands, leaving heights of dry land with few nutrients. As streams flow lower, they bring water and nutrients to the low lands, creating lush places for flowers.

Highland forest flowers are small. They often have spreading root stocks, and fragrant, delicate flowers in star or bell shapes. These flowers include wild lily-of-the-valley (*Maianthemum canadense*), the almond-scented twinflower (*Linnaea borealis*), and the beautiful yellow clintonia, or bluebead lily (*Clintonia borealis*).

Woodland flowers of the mid slopes include the pink lady's slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*), one of Newfoundland's exotic terrestrial orchids. Shady forest floors rich with leaf mould also bear the ghostly one-flowered shinleaf (*Moneses uniflora*), and its relative the Indian pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*), also called corpse plant because of its spectral, white glow.

In the forest lowlands plants are more diverse. Wild flowers like goldenrod, asters and meadowsweet bloom among flowering shrubs like red osier dogwood, chuckley pears (*Amelanchier* of *Rosaceae*), high bush cranberry, and red elderberry. Wild flowers here can range from woodland to wetland varieties.



Labrador Tea

Ledum groenlandicum

WETLANDS: Newfoundland's main wetlands are peatlands. These are divided into fens and bogs. Fens are meadows found at the bottoms of woodland slopes. They bear flowering shrubs like sweet gale (*Myrica gale*), shrubby cinquefoil, and northern honeysuckle. Fens contain pools that nourish sundews, bogbean, Solomon's seal, and white-fringed orchids.

Bogs have a high water level close to the peat cover. Here grow some of Newfoundland's most familiar flowering plants. The bakeapple's single white flower blooms in June. Under the haunting call of the snipe, the pitcher plant sends its young red leaves and sturdy wine and gold flowers.

Proclaimed Newfoundland's floral emblem in 1954, the pitcher plant makes up for the bogs' low nutrient content by ingesting insects that fall prey to the sticky hairs and juices inside the jug-shaped leaves.

BARRENS: The lands we call "barren" are not really barren at all. They are heathlands, home to a wealth of flowering shrubs that shed fragrance for miles and bear berries that have supplemented household economies for generations. The island's main heathlands are the Kalmia barrens, where knee-high shrubs with furled or downturned leaves to conserve moisture and protect the plants against the wind. The low bush blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*), wild rhododendron (*Rhododendron canadense*) and sheep laurel (*Kalmia angustifolia*) grow here, along with the aromatic Labrador tea (*Ledum groenlandicum*) that perfumes the wind over the summer heath.

CALCIUM AND SERPENTINE SOILS: The west coast of the island has limestone cliffs and moonscape-like serpentine areas whose flowers differ dramatically from those found in eastern Newfoundland. On the windblown upper terraces of the calcium cliffs grow exotic flowers rare enough to warrant protected status. The terraces, mantled with snowy mountain avens (*Dryas integrifolia*), have been nicknamed "the dryas rock gardens". Yellow dwarf orchids grow here, and the lovely willow herb known as river beauty (*Epilobium latifolium*) grows in spectacular masses.

Soils of the west coast's serpentine mountains contain nearly toxic levels of magnesium, iron, nickel and chromium. Alpine flowers like sea thrift and bluebells share this strange land with unique serpentine species that include sandworts (*Arenaria spp.*) and alpine campion (*Lychnia alpina*).

LABRADOR: Because they bloom sparsely in a vast land, the flowers of Labrador glow brighter to attract pollinators, than flowers farther south. Permafrost keeps root systems shallow, yet moistens the soil enough to support many flowers. Leaves of Labrador flowers are thick and curled inward to fend off cold and wind.

Many Labrador flowers are able to freeze solid, then thaw and continue growing. Berries and flowers of cranberry and blueberry varieties occur together because of the short season. Fiery lichen combine with blooms that look like exotic desert flowers because of their high colour and novel shapes adapted to the land. The lemony Arctic poppy (*Papaver radicum*), the scarlet roseroot (*Sedum roseum*), and sunny Alpine arnica (*Arnica alpina*) deck the land with brilliance.



Blue Bead Lily

Clintonia borealis

Protecting Our Wild Flowers

Like other inhabitants of our wilderness areas, our wild flowers need protection. Our parks and protected areas are sanctuaries for these and other wilderness life forms. Recent moves to protect our wild plants have been made. New provincial legislation restricting the use of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) on our wetlands will slow down the large-scale destruction our wild flora faced before the new laws. The province's Wildflower Society has been working since early 1990 toward enacting legislative protection of pitcher plants. The Newfoundland Orchid Society has worked to increase awareness of our delicate wild orchids and the need to protect them.

You can do a lot to help our wild flowers. The biggest step is becoming aware of them, and learning their names and the places they are likely to be found. Many flowers, like the exotic pink lady's slipper, inhabit trails and pathways. Simply looking where you step can ensure they do not get trampled. A field guide, such as the Audubon, Golden or Peterson series, can help you identify any flower you are likely to see in your area. Once you begin to know their names, the wild flowers of our province's parks and natural spaces will open up to you, unfolding their symmetry, their beauty, and their stories.

What's In A Name

There are stories in flower names. Here are three common wild flower names and the stories behind them:

DAISY: Comes from the Old English 'doeges eage', which means 'day's eye'. The flower was given this name because the bloom opens in the morning.

DANDELION: Comes from the French 'dent-de-lion', a translation of the medieval Latin 'dens leonis' or 'lion's tooth'. This name comes from the jagged shape of the leaves.

PLANTAIN: Comes from the Latin 'plantago', which means 'a footprint'. The plantain sprang up in the paths of colonists around the world. Aboriginal people in Australia and New Zealand called it 'Englishman's foot'. North American native people called it 'white man's foot'. Pilgrims in the middle ages called the plant 'follower of the heel of Christ'. The juices in the leaves were once applied as an ointment to travellers' weary feet. The leaves themselves, broad and close to the ground, resemble the sole of a human foot.



Blue Flag
Iris versicolor



Ancient Uses of Wild Flowers

People have used wild flowering plants for centuries in a variety of ways. Here are three wild flowers and their old-time uses:

SOAPWORT: Also called bouncing bet, this plant's Latin name, *Saponaria officinalis*, comes from the Latin 'Sapo', which means 'soap'. The plant's gummy juice lathers when mixed with water. Soapwort has been used like soap since ancient times.

GROUND IVY: This little purple flower with fragrant leaves is also called gill-over-the-ground. The name 'gill' comes from the French 'guiller', meaning 'to ferment'. The leaves were used to ferment and flavour beer before the use of hops became widespread. An old name for this plant was 'alehoof'.

MEADOWSWEET: This flower had an ancient use as a strewing herb. People decked houses with it and strewed it in chambers and halls in summer. They believed its fragrance made the heart merry and delighted the senses.

Flowers As Food

Many wild flowering plants have delicious roots, stems, leaves or flowers. Some have been used as survival food through the centuries. Others have traditionally formed a regular part of people's diets. Here are some edible wild flowers:

ORACH: This red-flowering plant grows on beach rocks in Newfoundland and Labrador. Orach that grows near seawater becomes salt-scented and succulent. It can be steamed or boiled as a pot herb, and is a source of iron and vitamin A.

OYSTERLEAF: Also called sea lungwort, this is another seaside plant. Its stems trail along sand and gravel beaches, and its flowers are pink, mauve and blue. Its fleshy, blue-grey leaves have a salty, oyster-like taste.

FIREWEED: This familiar reddish purple spire grows in areas that have been cut over or scarred by fire. The young leaves can be washed and steamed, and enjoyed with butter and lemon.

STINGING NETTLE: This plant, with its stinging hairs and small mauve flowers, is more useful than generally supposed. It has been used as a substitute for rennet, which causes milk to curd when making cheese. Its young shoots can also be picked, using gloves, then washed and stewed to make a delicious green vegetable.

DANDELION: While Newfoundlanders traditionally use the young shoots as a welcome early spring vegetable, the entire plant is edible. The roots, cut and roasted, can be used like coffee. The flowers can be used to make wine.

Nature's Pharmacy

Wild flowers have been used in folk remedies throughout history. Modern pharmaceutical research is constantly finding new curative properties of plants that grow wild in our meadows, fens and woodlands. Here are some flowers and their healing powers:

PITCHER PLANT: For centuries the pitcher plant has been considered a folk medicine. North American natives made medicine from it to fight smallpox. The plant's thick underground rhizomes have been used to cure menstrual, stomach and diuretic ailments.

EVENING PRIMROSE: Medicinal use of this plant is ancient. Its common archaic name was 'king's cure-all'. Late 20th century research suggests the seed oil can alleviate eczema, asthma, migraines, premenstrual syndrome, metabolic disorders, diabetes, and arthritis. Evening primrose oil, a source of gamma-linolenic acid, has been sold in health food stores during the past two decades as a near miracle-cure.

WILD FLOWERS IN AIDS RESEARCH: Red clover, common St. John's wort, and cow parsnip contain elements under scrutiny by modern researchers in the fight against AIDS. Each of these plants has a long history of folk medicinal use. All grow wild in Newfoundland.

Natural Dyes

Wild flowers have been used for centuries to give colours to textiles. These are some Newfoundland wild flowers from which dyes can be made:

CURLED DOCK: A common roadside and lawn visitor, this plant with its mealy red flower can create the colours gold, ochre and orange, depending on which mordant or fixative is used.

BUTTER-AND-EGGS: This cream and yellow wild flower makes a bright yellow dye when tin is used as a mordant.

WILD CHERRY: Juice from the cherries creates pretty shades of pinkish beige without any mordant.

Newfoundland's Unusual Orchids

Newfoundland and Labrador is one of the world's few places where wild orchids still live undisturbed. The province is home to 35 species. But one species is special in that it is named after Newfoundland. It is called, in Latin, '*Platanthera lacera* var. *terra-novae*'. This orchid is unique to Newfoundland and Sable Island.

Another orchid found in Newfoundland is not reported to exist anywhere else in North America. Its name is *Platanthera albida* var. *straminea*.

Most orchids grow on trees, drawing nutrients from the branches. But Newfoundland's orchids are herbaceous perennials that grow out of the earth, except for two species which lack chlorophyll and feed on decaying matter on the forest floor.



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