

May 3, 2005

The Colours of May

Although the flamboyant colours of fall inevitably receive the most attention, there is an equally beautiful showing of colour in May. From the radiant white blossoms of serviceberries and trilliums to the newly-emerged lime-green leaves of sugar maples, May paints the landscape with a gentle warmth all its own. And, unlike many phenomena in nature, the transformation of the landscape from grays and browns to greens, whites, yellows and pinks, is easily observed by all.

The order in which the various species of plants bloom and come into leaf is the same each year. Although variations in weather conditions may accelerate or slow down the process, the general sequence does not change. The first herbaceous plant to flower in spring in the Kawarthas is coltsfoot, a yellow-blossomed denizen of roadsides. Usually by mid-April, the first true woodland flowers appear, beginning with hepatica and followed shortly after by bloodroot, blue cohosh, trailing arbutus and, by month's end, marsh marigold. As we move into early May, dozens of other species join the blossom parade including dandelion, spring beauty, trout lily, bellwort and serviceberry. By the middle of the month, we can expect to find lilac, white trillium, red trillium and pin cherry all in bloom. And, by late May, Mayapple, Jack-in-the-Pulpit, wild columbine, choke cherry, red-osier dogwood, hawthorn and the first orchids will be flowering.

The leaf-out of trees and shrubs follows a predictable sequence, too. Red-berried elder is the first species to come into leaf, usually in late April. Early May brings us the leaves of Manitoba maple, Norway maple, trembling aspen, lilac, willows and both pin and choke cherry. Sugar maple, bigtooth aspen and tamarack leaf out in mid-May, while red maple, basswood, oaks, elms and ashes wait until later in the month to produce their leaves.

This, the fairest of all months, begins with branches bare to the sky but ends with the freshness of new leaf as a green veil is drawn down upon our forests and woodlots. As the trees leaf out, take time to notice all of the different shades of green that grace the landscape. Among my favourites are the shiny, light greens of aspens, the bright lime of maples and the gentle, pastel tones of new tamarack needles.

In addition to the spectrum of greens, white is another signature colour of May. Like many of the woodland plants that bloom this month, most of our native shrubs also have white blossoms. Early in the month, serviceberries stand out like white beacons against the slowly greening landscape. These small trees grow in clumps and are common along roadsides and field edges. We tend to notice them only in the spring, however, when their beautiful masses of white, five-petal flowers burst forth. Belonging to the genus *Amelanchier*, they also go by the name of Juneberry, because their fruits ripen in June. The name serviceberry comes from the fact that their flowering coincided with funeral services held by early settlers in the spring to bury people who had died over the winter. Burial during the winter months was impossible because of the frozen ground. Later in the month, pin cherries and choke cherries add their own splashes of white. They tend to grow in the same habitat as serviceberries. Cherry leaves are unique in that they are tinged with bronze-orange when they emerge. Hawthorns, a species of old fields, and red-osier dogwoods, a shrub of wetland edges, complete the white blossom parade. Many of our wildflowers also have white blossoms. The white trillium is certainly the best known. Standing nearly a foot tall and flaunting flowers three or four inches across, trilliums form a carpet of white over the forest floor that is hard not to notice. This species is well-named with its three leaves, three petals and three sepals.

Yellow is another dominant colour this month. And, any discussion of yellow leads directly to the dandelion. Introduced from Europe, dandelions provide copious amounts of pollen and nectar to insect visitors. In fact, botanists speculate that when dandelions are at their flowering peak, insects abandon most other plants in order to enjoy the dandelion feast. This may even have a negative effect on the ability of some plants to become pollinated and could theoretically force them to eventually shift their flowering dates. Dandelions are also largely responsible for the first honey of the season, thanks to their attractiveness to honey bees. The flowers are a favourite spring food of black bears, too. Yellow flowers also turn up in wet habitats in early spring, thanks mostly to marsh marigolds. In the unblocked sunlight, they grow up to 18 inches tall and have huge, heart-shaped leaves. The flowers usually have five petals. When in full bloom, marigolds are particularly easy to see, even by the quick glance of a speeding motorist.

It is believed that white and yellow are particularly efficient colours at reflecting sunlight from a plant's petals onto the central reproductive parts of the flower. This helps to accelerate the development of pollen and seed in the cool spring weather. The heat that accumulates in this manner may actually raise the temperature inside a trillium or marigold several degrees above the surrounding air. Insect pollinators probably find the slightly warmer temperatures of the flowers very much to their liking, as well.

In order to see the whole flower show, you will need to be out looking at least once a week. Woodland plants in particular have a very short blooming period. Their life cycle is attuned to the rhythms of the forest canopy. Once the leaves have fully emerged, most flowers quickly disappear. The light available on the forest floor for photosynthesis falls to 1% of the level at the top of the canopy. In the deep shade of the inner forest, plants struggle to produce enough food even for their own needs, let alone having food left over for the purpose of flowering and seed maturation. Species like trilliums are therefore engaged in a veritable race against the clock to bloom, attract pollinators and build food reserves through photosynthesis before the canopy closes. In order to be ready to take advantage of the short season, many wildflowers actually preform their leaves and flowers in miniature the year before. Expansion into full, above-ground flowers is mostly the result of water uptake when warm spring conditions arrive.

Two of the better places to see woodland plants include Mark S. Burnham Provincial Park on Highway 7, just east of Peterborough, and the Emily Tract forest, located in the City of Kawartha Lakes on Victoria Cty. Rd. 14, west of Cty. Rd. 10.

What to watch for this week

If we get warm temperatures and southerly winds, expect the arrival of large numbers of neotropical migrants such as ruby-throated hummingbirds, house wrens and Baltimore orioles. Keep your sunflower feeder well-stocked, too, as rose-breasted grosbeaks, just back from a winter in Costa Rica, may pay you a visit.

Drew Monkman is a local naturalist, teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*.