In Nature's Garden:

The Closed, Blind or Bottle Gentian

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WHEN the bottle gentians start to appear around the edge of the University of Virginia’s Biological Station at Mountain Lake, then it is time to close up the summer school and return to Charlottesville for the fall. The gentians start blooming in late August and continue through October; actually, if the weather is not too severe, they can be found even later than this. (Miss Walton made this illustration of a gentian she saw at Mountain Lake after there had been quite a severe frost). When they first come out, bottle gentians are blue, that brilliant blue which only gentians can really achieve. As the flower grows older, the corolla turns a deep purple. Thoreau described the color as “a splendid blue, light in the shade, turning to purple with age” and goes on to say “bluer than the bluest sky, they lurk in the moist and shady recesses of the banks.” This is true, but they seem particularly to favor the edges of woodlands, as the trees give way to clearings.

There are two very similar species which are both called bottle gentians, Gentiana andrewsii, formerly Dasystephana and Gentiana clausa. The latter is supposed to be slightly smaller, but the two plants are really very hard to tell apart. They are both perennials with stiff, stout stems 1-2 feet high. As with most members of the gentian family, the leaves are opposite; they are pointed at the tip and narrowed or rounded at the base, sessile, that is without a stalk, and slightly roughened at the edges. The flowers are 1-1½ inches long, also without separate flower stalks. They are arranged in terminal clusters and there may also be a few flowers in the axils of the upper leaves. The corolla is occasionally white but usually the proper gentian blue. It is tubular, as in all gentians, and has rather indistinct lobes which remain nearly or completely closed at the summit, hence or course, the various common names. The bees, however, are not put off by this apparent lack of access. They alight on the flower, pull the lobes apart, and force an entrance, gaining nectar for themselves and ensuring pollination for the flower. There are two short stigmas and five stamens, their anthers united into a tube which is inserted on the corolla.

The gentian family has a world wide distribution with 70 genera and about 800 species. The name gentian comes from Gentius who was king of Illyria, part of Greece, in the second century B.C. He had a somewhat checkered military career, being continually in trouble with the Romans and finally ending up as a prisoner at Spoletium after a defeat in battle. However, he must also have had his scientific side, because, according to Pliny, it was he who first discovered the bitter principle in the gentian root and used it medicinally. Gentian root comes from Gentiana lutea, the yellow gentian, otherwise known as bitter root or welwort. It is a European species and is still used today for its bitter properties. All members of the family have some bitter juice in their stems. Gentian violet, the old-fashioned remedy for thrush, pin-worms and fever blisters is an aniline dye derivative, and has no direct relationship, other than color, with any member of the gentian family. The specific name clausa merely means ‘closed.’ Gentiana andrewsii was called after Henry C. Andrews, an English botanical artist and engraver who worked at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

Most gentians bloom in the late summer and fall. It is comforting to have something so attractive appearing so late in the year. Bottle gentians have a wide distribution in the eastern United States and across the midwest. As well as woodlands, they are found in meadows, prairies and thickets, as long as the location is sufficiently moist. They can be transplanted relatively easily and will also last well as cut flowers. However, I am always a little hesitant to mention both of those attributes, lest it encourage widespread digging up of a plant which is really best growing in its own natural habitat - so enjoy it there if you can.