Wild Flowers at Monticello

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Illustration By Lucia Goodwin

It is March now, on the grounds of Monticello, as well as in the rest of Virginia, and the bloodroot is starting to bloom. Thomas Jefferson saw it too, and wrote in his Garden Book on April 6, 1766... "Narcissus and Puckoon open..." and on April 13... "Puckoon flowers fallen." Bloodroot, Sanguinaria canadensis, a member of the poppy family, is still frequently referred to as red puccoon, and still blooms wild in the woods down by the Rivanna River at Monticello. A couple of pieces of it have been transplanted up near the house where they are doing well. Perhaps the spring of 1766 was rather cool and windless. This would explain why the bloodroot came out so late and stayed so long. Seven days is a long time for the petals to remain on a bloodroot flower. Usually the bloom is very fleeting and lasts only a day or so. Possibly he could have been looking at a succession of different flowers on the same plant, or at a number of different plants in one patch.

In contrast to his volatility about all of the cultivated plants grown on his land, Jefferson was curiously reticent about the wildflowers of his beloved mountain home. However, by seeking out his occasional references to native flora, and by looking at what blooms on the grounds of Monticello today, we can infer what the woods must have looked like as he strolled through them, his mind full of the affairs of the state.

In the early spring the bloodroot would have been plentiful and probably also spring beauty, Claytonia, rue anemone, Anemonella, blues, Houstonia and Hepatica. The grounds are deficient in some species of Trillium. There are plenty of wake robins, Trillium erectum, but only a few great white trillium, T. grandiflorum and no painted or yellow trillium.

There are lots of yellow lady's slippers, Cypripedium calceolus, in the woods and they usually start blooming in April. There are also some moccasin flowers C. acaule, and a good many showy orchis, Orchis spectabilis. Down by the river there are carpets of trout lilies, Erythronium americanum, in early spring, and later on there will be may apple, jack-in-the-pulpit and wild geranium.

All grape hyacinths (Muscaris spp.) were originally introduced into this continent from Europe, but they naturalized easily and have spread over many a meadow and hillside in Virginia. Jefferson brought grape hyacinths with him from his birthplace at Shadwell and planted them widely at Monticello. They still flourish there in profusion particularly on the banks around the vegetable garden where they are picked for cut flowers for the house in early spring and "mowed off like hay" at the beginning of summer.

Jefferson used a lot of native shrubs in his planting. He mentions a whole list of shrubs and trees "less than 10 feet high" which he planned to use for landscaping in the area between the house and the cemetery.

There are five original trees near the house which were planted in Jefferson's time. Until the bad ice storm of 1975 which took the toll of a fine copper beech, there were six. Today there remain on the west side of the house two tulip poplars which will bloom in late spring and a big European larch with a trunk 18 inches in diameter. On the east side there is an American linden tree and on the southwest side a sugar maple which should start to show some color quite early.

The best way to see the wildflowers of Monticello is to take the circular trail round the base of the mountain. Jefferson, thoughtful as always of the people and (continued on page 10)
animals who worked at Monticello, did not want his mules and wagons going straight up and down the hillside, so he designed circular trails round the mountain which he called his “roundabouts.” There were four main roundabouts which interconnected at various places on the mountain. The present trail follows parts of the third and fourth roundabouts. Along the trail, in addition to many of the flowers already mentioned, will be the pink azalea, star chickweed, wild ginger, crested iris and Virginia bluebells.

The bellwort will be out in April, as will the columbine, squirrel corn and toothwort. Later on in the summer there will be some black-eyed Susan out in the meadow, golden rod, cohoosh and cardinal flower. Mr. Crawford, Superintendent of Grounds at Monticello

and co-author of this article, is gradually compiling his own “garden book,” a list of the native flowers and when and where they bloom on the grounds, an activity of which Mr. Jefferson would have wholeheartedly approved.

To take a walk along this trail in early spring is a very good start for anyone interested in the wildflowers of Monticello - or just wildflowers anywhere. The flowers are there, courtesy of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, for us all to enjoy, and your speculations about life in the eighteenth century as you stroll through these woods may be all your own.

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