"In Nature's Garden"

The Rose Pink

By ELIZABETH MURRAY

Gentian is a word which usually conjures up for me the color blue and the country Switzerland. The genus Gentiana is a large one and contains those exciting and intensely blue flowers which one finds in the Alps and other mountain regions. But in North America we have another important genus, Sabatia, which also belongs to the gentian family, Gentianaceae, and in which the flowers are nearly always pink, occasionally lilac or white.

Sabatia angularis, the marsh or rose pink, sometimes called the bitterroot, has a wide distribution from Connecticut to Michigan and Kansas, and south to Florida and Texas, although within that distribution it occurs only sporadically and is sometimes hard to locate. It likes good, moist soil, and grows at the edges of peaty woods and in low lying damp, rich meadows. The plant has a rather tough, erect stem, usually branching twice at every axil so that the terminal flowers form a sort of loose cyme. There are five petals united at the base into a tube as with all members of the family. There are also five sepals and the same number of stamens. The style is rather long and divided at the tip. The ovary is superior forming eventually a 2-valved capsular fruit. The petals are usually a beautiful rose-pink hence the common name, with a greenish center. The flower blooms in late summer, July and August.

In Massachusetts, other members of the genus Sabatia have been involved in a curious annual ritual based on a misunderstanding. At Plymouth, where Sabatia is particularly abundant, the flowers are called "rose of Plymouth" and were sold in the streets for the adornment of homes and especially churches. Local tradition in eastern Massachusetts derives the name from the word Sabbath and the legend is that the Pilgrims first saw the flower on the Sabbath and after that would have no other flower in their churches for midsummer decoration. The Pilgrims may well have seen the pinks on the Sabbath, and probably on other days of the week too, but the derivation is actually erroneous. The genus was dedicated to Liberato Sabbati, an eighteenth century Italian botanist.

The gentian family as a whole is a versatile group whose members are spread over a wide variety of habitats from the arctic to the equator and from high mountains to brackish pools and freshwater marshes at sea level. They are mostly herbs, although a few are shrubby, and they are usually perennials. Many members of the family contain a bitter principle with medicinal properties. Gentiana lutea is the main European species from which druggists obtained their pharmaceutical 'gentian-root' which was used as a bitter tonic but is obsolete nowadays. Gentian violet, which is still used today for its antifungal action, is so called merely for its color. It is manufactured chemically and does not come from the plants. The genus is named for Gentius, king of Illyria who, according to Pliny, first discovered the medicinal properties of the plants.

Sabatia also contains a bitter principle, hence another of its common names, bitterroot, although as far as I know it has not been used medicinally. There are about a dozen species found in eastern North America, most of them blooming in mid- to late summer. Down in southwest Virginia near Blacksburg there is a little valley called Poverty Hollow which is anything but 'poor' in its flora. Along its banks in July and August there are magnificent clumps of rose pink, and it was from one of these that Miss Walton painted the picture which appears here.

Illustrated by Lucile Walton

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