Don’t Ignore Our Roadside Weeds

The word weed has many definitions, the shortest of which is ‘an unwanted plant.’ This definition may apply more to the place where the plant is growing than to the species of plant. Thus a plant may be a weed in one place, but perfectly within its rights as a crop or ornamental in another. Perhaps the flowers which grow along our roadsides are not technically weeds, since they are doing no harm there. But they are frequently spreading into the farmlands behind the roadsides where they are not wanted and because of this we may retain the term weed. However, weeds or no, we need not deny them their beauty, and on this page we are showing three plants, all introduced, which brighten our Virginia roadsides in summertime.

The orange day-lily, *Hemerocallis fulva*, (Liliaceae), introduced from Eurasia as an ornamental, grows in large clumps along roadsides, fields and thickets and blooms from May to July. As both the English and Greek names suggest (*hemera*, ‘a day’ and *callos*, ‘beauty’), each flower lasts only a day, but there are several flowers on each stalk, so they appear to bloom for longer. They rarely make seeds in this country, but rapidly spread vegetatively by means of their branching rhizomes and tuberous roots.

Chicory, *Chichorium intybus* (Compositae), was introduced from Europe as a coffee substitute. The tap roots can be roasted and ground and when mixed with real coffee make it go much further, but also give it a distinctive taste which is not to everyone’s liking. There is a wry comment in Fernald’s edible wild food book that the fact the chicory itself is often further adulterated with sawdust, roasted beans and dried horse liver may account for the scarcity of good coffee in European hotels. The flower of chicory is a brilliant blue and dots our roadsides and waste places from July to October.

Bouncing Bet, *Saponaria officinalis*, is a member of the pink family, Caryophyllaceae, and is also introduced from Europe, probably accidentally. It is a tall, stocky perennial with groups of very pale pink flowers on each stem. Bouncing Bet probably has more common names than any other flower, being known as Soapwort, Old Maid’s Pink, Wild Sweet William, Sheepweed, World’s Wonder, Fuller’s Herb and Lady’s Washbowl. It is particularly prevalent along railroads but is also found on roadsides, fields and waste places, and blooms from July to September.

These flowers do not deserve to be ignored just because they are introduced, common, or frequently in the wrong place. Our drives through the state would be a great deal duller without them, and we should take time to pause and enjoy them.