

The Earth Laughs in Flowers

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

National Wildflower Week is celebrated the first full week of May, which makes sense for Texas where the event was first promoted by the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin. However, in Nebraska May is often laced with cold and snow and few wildflowers are yet blooming, thus wildflower week is not celebrated here until the first full week in June. This year we're wondering if June might even be a bit early, as the state has remained unusually cool. But with a warming trend even our western prairies seem to be finally awakening from a long winter slumber. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "The earth laughs in flowers" and Nebraska's prairies are starting to chuckle. It's been a moist spring across much of the state, and we're hoping this chuckle will grow into a delightful belly laugh in the coming weeks.

When we think of wildflowers, we generally gravitate toward well-behaved native plants with showy blooms. It's easy to think their flowers are blooming just for us and many poets have expressed that notion in beautiful prose. However, the wildflowers don't care what we humans think of them. Instead, they're trying to catch the attention of insects—especially pollinating insects that have co-evolved with them. Bees, flies, beetles, wasps, moths, butterflies and even ants are co-opted to help these plants spread their genes. The insect-flower association is incredibly fascinating for those who explore it.

As the old saying goes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder and that certainly holds true for wildflowers. Some species like penstemons, gayfeathers and asters are easy to love while others take a little bit of work. Hoary vervain (*Verbena stricta*) is a good example of a tough native wildflower that gets very little respect. It's not eaten by livestock and thus is often abundant on overgrazed pastures. Its commonness and association with poor land management means we don't give it much thought. And yet its lavender and blue flower spikes mid-to-late summer are some of the most important flowers for summer butterflies like fritillaries and swallowtails.

Cancer-root (*Orobanche fasciculata*) doesn't sound like a flower worth knowing and it's easy to miss on the shortgrass prairies of the high plains. But when you learn that it lacks chlorophyll, grows only as a parasite on the roots of sagebrush, and that the entire plant was used by Native Americans to treat cancer and other issues, it's a lot more interesting. Another fun fact: botanists still aren't sure how it completes its life cycle.

Compass plant (*Silphium laciniatum*) looks like just another mid-summer sunflower from a distance, but up close its large basal leaves are held in a flat plain, often in a north-south direction—and thus its common name. With a very deep taproot, it's one of the longest-lived plants in the tallgrass prairie. Fun fact: its resinous sap was used as a chewing gum by Native Americans. What's not to love about a plant like that?

Other forlorn native wildflowers that deserve more respect include the tall thistle (*Cirsium altissimum*) that is a magnet for bees and butterflies; nodding beggar-ticks with dainty yellow blooms in late summer but cursed for its barbed seeds that stick to clothing; curly-cup gumweed (*Grindelia squarrosa*) with yellow aster-like blooms emerging from sticky buds; showy milkweed, coarse and weedy in texture but with incredibly fragrant blooms June to July, and an important plant for migrating monarchs; stiff goldenrod (*Solidago rigida*), one of the few natives that can compete with smooth brome in roadside ditches; and false boneset (*Brickellia eupatoroides*) which shines with delight when its bright fuzzy seedheads emerge in the fall. And the list goes on and on.

Enjoying wildflowers is a great way to enjoy the natural beauty of Nebraska from spring through fall and even into winter. Take some time this year to appreciate native plants beyond the attractiveness of their blooms. And for June Wildflower Week events, see <https://plantnebraska.org/connect/events/wildflowers.html> .

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CUTLINE: Hoary vervain may be ignored by cattle, but it's important to fritillaries and swallowtails.

