

Wildwood Flowers

One of the more enjoyable things about wildwood is the wildflowers. Coincidentally, two of the finest weeks of summer are the week before and the week after the July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend; not just because of the annual picnic, and the delightful summer weather, but because that is generally the peak of the wildflower bloom. Historically, Faye and I have made it a point to try to spend one of those weeks at Wildwood. That wasn't always possible when we were working but we rarely miss one or both of those weeks now that we are in retirement.

Some years are noticeably better than others. We had a five plus year drought from about 2002 to 2007 during which the wildflowers were very sparse. We had hardly any bloom at all a couple of those years and it was sorely missed. We started noticing a few patches of Indian Paint brush again in 2008. It is amazing how they can stay dormant for that long and then slowly reappear.

The wild flowers are fairly drought tolerant, but like the trees, are highly dependent on rain. The very best years are when we have a bountiful winter snow and some good moisture during late May or early June. I have mentioned previously that we get a monsoonal flow normally in August which is beneficial for the trees but too late for the wild flowers. However, we occasionally get a monsoonal flow in June. You don't want to miss the July bloom when we get some good spring rains.

Faye and I particularly remember the summer of 1986. We were building our house during that summer. It would cloud up suddenly about 1 PM and rain quite hard for thirty minutes or so, sometimes a real cloud burst. We could almost set our clocks by it. We had to buy a wet-dry shop vac and suck the water up off the sub flooring to keep it from warping. That July had to be one of the best wild flower blooms ever. The entire valley floor toward Spinney and Eleven Mile reservoirs was red tinged with paint brush. Those events seemed to be much more prevalent back before the turn of the century. We hope it is coming back.

There are two times of the year that we make sure to visit the Pike National Forest bordering our subdivision on the east. The first "must" date for your calendar is during early July for the wild flower bloom. The second date that you don't want to miss is the week around September 25. That date is important to us for two reasons. It is Faye's birthday and we are guaranteed to see the aspens in their full peak of color. You can bank on it.

Faye and I have seen some beautiful botanical gardens and toured the famous Raymond Burr orchid gardens in Fiji. But without a doubt, our most awesome flower or wildflower

experience ever was in 1996. I was serving as a black powder rifle instructor at a late July rendezvous in the White River Wilderness Area which is on the flats above and north of Glenwood Springs. Take exit 133 at Dotsero on I-70 just west of Gypsum; go west then north a mile or so; then west about ten miles on a gravel road to the plateau top overlooking Glenwood Canyon. There were hundreds and hundreds of acres of solid wildflowers of every variety imaginable. I was so impressed that I took Faye on a special trip from Littleton a week later just to see it. She has never forgotten the experience either.

The second most memorable wildflower experience of our lives was the two summers that we toured Alaska in our RV. Independence Mine State Historical Park is located on a mountain top above and north of Palmer, Alaska. The entire mountain top was covered solid with orange/yellow columbines. Unfortunately I can't find a photo of them. We were also impressed with the fireweed throughout Alaska. I had never seen fireweed before, or so I thought. Then I noticed it growing over south of Tarryall Reservoir. I've gathered and planted fireweed seeds around my house but have never got it to grow. It has the unique characteristic of having the bloom start at the stem base and work upward as the season progresses. Fall has arrived when the last blossoms reach the top. Our native penstemons (snapdragon family) at Wildwood behave the same way and blooms throughout the summer.

One of our favorite wildflowers is the blue columbine which is our Colorado state flower. Similar to aspens, columbines require more moisture and better soil than most wildflowers and will be more prevalent in semi shade. So the best places to look for them are at the edges of aspen groves where these conditions are met. We know several specific locations that they thrive best and make a point to search them out. They do well just under the south edge of my deck. See the attached photo of our blue columbine.

Like the columbines, various wildflower species are quite selective in the soil and environment that they have adapted to. For example, scarlet buglers grow on sunny south facing slopes where the soil is poor and well drained. Our purple and yellow asters (wild daisies) are very drought tolerant also and seem to grow anywhere. I have planted wild iris or "blue flags" around my rain gutter down spouts where they will get a lot of natural water and they do well there. You can see whole meadows of them over in the national forest and along State Highway 24 between Jefferson and Elk Horn Road, particularly around the Michigan Creek area. The small potentilla shrubs with the small bright yellow blossoms do well in meadows. I have several planted on the south side of my garage where the rain runs off the roof. The purple/blue penstemons, blue bells and bright orange/red Indian paint brush are native to our area, fairly common, show well and last a long time as do our pink wild "sticky" geraniums. There are quite a few yellow shooting stars, white blazing stars and lovely low growing whitish

pink evening prim roses around the yard. Also we have a small native cactus species that have miniature blossoms. Examine each of them closely and discover how dainty and exquisite they really are.

Some of our wildflowers are actually weeds. The beautiful purple and white bull thistles and Canadian thistles that we have along our interior roads and drainages are actually classified as noxious and should be eradicated wherever you find them. Then there's the ubiquitous dandelion that is a colorful bright yellow weed. They choke out other plants but are good for erosion control. I search out and pull the dainty purple flowered sand burr plants whenever I see them. They are a real nuisance. I have fixed too many flat bicycle tires and picked too many burrs out of grand children's shoe laces to ever endear them to me.

We have spent many hours planting and nurturing wildflowers and even common bedding plants at Wildwood. It takes a lot of experimenting. Success depends on a number of factors such as: the high altitude at 9200 feet, short growing season, rain, soil condition and animals. One time we left a flat of petunias out over night that I was going to plant in some barrel planters on our deck. The flat was grazed off the next morning by the rabbits and was as bare as a table top. One time we had two nice barrel planters filled with marigolds, petunias, pansies and various colorful "valley" flowers. A hard freeze one night in early July ruined our enjoyment of them for that summer. Only a select few non native flowers will survive the rabbits and what they don't get the chipmunks may. I made chicken wire enclosures about two feet high along the edge of our deck for my flower gardens to keep the rabbits out. That didn't work because the rabbits would jump off the stairs and low part of the deck into the enclosures, eat the flowers and get trapped. Also the chicken wire didn't keep the chipmunks out. And there are a lot of those little guys around if you have bird feeders to attract them.

During fall I collect wildflower and grass seeds from roadways all over at similar elevations like Cripple Creek and anywhere I find them in between. I'm not sure how many germinate. I've given up on sun flowers. I believe the elevation is too high for them. My most successful wildflower attempts at Wildwood are two rock gardens that are south facing and protected from the north by a building. I continue to experiment with varieties of wildflowers that the chipmunks and rabbits won't eat. California poppies, blue flax and marigolds resist the animals and do well. The zinnias bloom but seem to be stunted due to the very short growing seasons. I have some yucca growing for winter green but the rabbits will occasionally prune them during the winter. Let us know what you're successful with.

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Wildwood Blue Columbine



Faye in Alaskan Fireweed (Also at Tarryall)



Del picking Fall Wildflower Seeds



California Poppies in Our Rock Garden



Our Wildwood Yuccas by Deck



Our New 2008 Rock Garden



Blue Flax



Blazing Star



Wildwood dianthus



Rare Yellow Paint Brush at J. Nichols 1-139



Pike Nat'l Forest, cattle, potentilla, and aspens



Wildwood Penstemon