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Article abstract

The author accompanies her friend, a woodland wildflower expert, on a mission to save native Ohio wildflowers from sites destined for development.

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Where Wildflowers Grow

Jill Sell

The flowers hear us coming, Jane says.

They tremble in anticipation, quiver on the woodland floor, not knowing
we are friend or foe.

We park on the edge of exurbia. Jane's black SUV is abandoned on a paved cul-de-sac, where new concrete curbs and sewer grates come before houses. Dried mud balls the color of a fawn's fur litter the street. The dirt, once wedged in deep treads of excavating equipment, is left behind. But all will be hosed away before the housing development's Model Open House. Everything must be clean, pristine. In perfect order.

The land around the concrete circle is divided. It is marked by red rectangular plastic flags, stapled to crooked wooden stakes pounded into barren ground. Lot C-216. Lot C-217. Lot C-218. The rich top soil is gone, to be replaced by thirsty grass doused with toxic chemicals to make it grow faster.

We gather the plastic buckets, large black garbage bags, stained garden gloves with holey right index fingers, spades, shovels and bent trowels we have brought with us. We lock the car (an urban habit to be sure), walk across the stripped ground and into the edge of the woodlands. It is still spring, and the canopy has not fully developed with mature leaves. But at 7 a.m. and with a weak sun, the young canopy helps keep the air and floor cool, and the dew has not yet evaporated.

"We need to go in farther," Jane says.

Jane has been here already, scouting. She leads the way to the secluded large-flowered trillium bed, past pockets of Virginia bluebells, spring beauties and dainty squirrel corn. I follow her silently, trusting her, but wonder – and worry – about the small patches of mayapples, the umbrellas of the forest, we pass.

The woods seem quiet until you listen. Sunrays break through the canopy and spotlight a black-capped chickadee resting on a decaying, downed log and calling to a companion in a nearby oak. A twig snaps behind me as a chipmunk flees from the interlopers. But the almost-silence is good.

Jane and I are in the woods to rescue wildflowers. Another family farm has been sold. The farm's pasture and meadow are now extinct and will soon house boisterous families in bloated

mega-mansions. The bordering woods will also perish by bulldozers and backhoes.

We have only today. One day. One day to dig and carry away hundreds of wildflowers that do not yet know their fate. Jane has permission to be on the property, to take the wildflowers. She is a legendary wildflower rescuer. When she can, Jane convinces developers and builders to let her and a small group of volunteers rescue white baneberry or downy yellow violets that are scheduled for execution. Some builders say sure, fine, whatever. Just don't get in our way and you have one week. Others say no, don't trespass.

Usually Jane, who walks in tall brown rubber boots, has more time, more volunteers. But today she has only me. And only one day. One day to save the wildflowers. She learned about this habitat destruction too late. It takes a long time to find the right people to talk to, to convince them. Now we have only one day.

Jane has given thousands of native plants to botanical gardens, arboretums, schools, parks and private gardens. She is a folk hero, I tell her, but she dismisses the title and says others have done more.

No path leads us to the trilliums, but Jane follows their soft voices. I almost make a stupid joke and call her a Flower Whisperer. But I keep silent and let the humming insects fill the still air. Greedy branches reach out and tear at my long-sleeved khaki shirt. Nasty brambles scratch my old, faithful, wide-brimmed hat. But my heart is less protected as we enter a small area where trees don't quite stand shoulder to shoulder.

The white trilliums are alert. They are not sure if they should shrink low and hide their pure beauty or thrust out their mystical three petals, three leaves, three sepals and three stigmas in defiance and one last stand. The bed is much bigger than I anticipate, and hundreds of trilliums lie before me, untouched by hungry deer or unthinking park visitors.

"Jane, we can't possibly get..."

She stops my sentence with cold, warning eyes and thrusts her spade tip into the ground. Quickly, surgeon-like, she removes a trillium clump with spent brown leaves, soil and worms clinging. She places the mound into her bucket to be later transferred to a garbage bag that we can drag if the weight becomes too much to carry.

Native wildflowers are very difficult to successfully transplant. Most unethical home gardeners or professional poachers who dig ginseng or jack-in-the-pulpits from remote areas in state or national parks and private property have no idea what the plants need to thrive. Or the kidnappers cannot provide the needed, specialized environment. Many native and introduced plants also should never be brought into urban or suburban gardens because cross-pollination and garden chemicals can alter and weaken future generations.

The words endangered and threatened ring in my ears. We know so little. What medicinal powers of wildflowers have we yet to discover? What wildflowers themselves have we yet to find? According to the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center of the University of Texas at Austin, “as much as 30 percent of the world’s native flora is at risk of extinction.”

Jane and I have no idea how many of the plants we rescue this day will survive a season, a life cycle, or even if they will live into the next day. The realization of the situation pierces me and I look at the plants surrounding me hopelessly.

Jane and I work about 12 feet apart. The sound of two shovels slicing virgin soil, ripping beauty from its bed is sometimes in tandem. We work several hours, with few words, occasionally adding hispid buttercups or a white trout-lily (a plant which takes seven years or longer to provide a flower) to our buckets.

The wildflowers make me think of my childhood, growing up in a small cottage wrapped in woodlands. I shared the woods and butterfly-loving fields with wood nettle, whose hairs stung my bare young legs, and with the red berry clusters of the marvelous goldenseal. Toadstools were my playmates, shelf fungi my toys. I rested on moss-covered rocks, drank from cold spring water and collected hickory nuts and black walnuts. But I knew the stories – both fact and myth – of the wildflowers best of all.

I knew that Nancy Hanks Lincoln, mother of Abe, drank milk from cows that grazed in woodlands near her home filled with white snakeroot plants. The toxins in the wildflowers caused her death in 1818. I read the story describing how discoverer William Clark (of Lewis and Clark fame) pounded the roots and leaves of the wild ginger plant to make a salve to heal a knife wound on the leg one of his men accompanying him on the famous expedition.

I was told that the five-leaved common cinquefoil, which looks like a human hand, could ward off witches. I knew that bloodroot bleeds when injured and the juice was used by Native Americans to dye clothing and for face paint.

As a young girl, I also hoped that St. Johnswort could really foretell the date of my future wedding and who would be my groom. I was terrified at the ghostly Indian-pipe, a wildflower without chlorophyll that looks like dead fingers, but was a favorite of poet Emily Dickinson.

I decided then I wanted no stiff roses at my wedding, no florist’s gladiolas at my funeral. Let me carry a bride’s bouquet of wild orange butterfly weed and yellow-fringed orchids. Place pretty forget-me-nots on my coffin.

Here, now, in this woods, disconnected thoughts tumble through my head, the past becomes the present, the present becomes the past. It is getting very warm, unusually warm for spring and the biting flies have found my sweaty forehead. My back threatens to misbehave.

Jane stands and turns her head in the direction of the road, buffered by textured tree bark with facial lines of crones and thick brush where poison ivy frolics. She cocks her head like a wary animal, a fox that smells a hunting dog, and says, "Listen."

I hear the faint sound of big equipment gulp air and fuel and come alive. The excavators are on site and begin to push earth over the edge.

I sit down on the ground, despair robbing me of stamina. I touch a trillium petal, but even then can not bring myself to actually pick a flower. My father always told me a trillium plant would never bloom again if its flower were picked and his voice echoes in my ears.

Jane re-doubles her efforts. I watch as she uses her towel to skillfully scoop other small, young green plants into her bucket. I'm not even sure what they are. I can identify an elderberry's fragrant white umbel flowers and its dark purple berries, loved by birds, when the season is right. But I sometimes confuse the shrub if I see only its elongated leaves. I know purple cress, but only after its gentle lavender flowers make me smile when they bloom.

I'm not always sure. But Jane knows the plants by their leaves, their roots, their seeds. I am embarrassed that I can only identify a plant's vanity and not its soul. We can save some spring plants on the property, in the abandoned farmer's fields and in the woods. But the summer wildflowers here will be aborted. The fall wildflowers will never be conceived. No Queen Anne's lace, no Cardinal flower.

Jane looks confidently for small signs of emerging summer wildflowers, while I feel the darkness of frightened earth close around me and I remain motionless, hopeless, angry, at my ignorance.

But I gather some courage watching Jane. We dig another hour or so. We are not young women. I collected fruit from the pawpaw trees long, long ago in the woods by my home and pretended they were exotic bananas when I was child. I mixed white pine cones and needles to cook stew and roasted narrow-leaved cattail sausages when my young friends and I played house, Jane and Tarzan or Indian Maidens, decades ago. We played for hours outdoors back then. Now I am tired, very tired. And this is not play.

There are more trilliums left than I can count. More than I want to face. Jane sighs and signals we are calling it a day. She takes off her damp, earth-darkened gloves, wipes her forehead with a pink bandana and we head for the car. We walk carefully, trying not to step on any fragile plants. A habit, I suppose, a respectful habit.

I can't turn around. For the first time I hear the plants. Some are screaming. Others sob. Many are pleading, "Pick me, take me." A few are silent, bleeding tears. It's the heat, heat exhaustion, that is getting to me, I say to myself and I walk faster. The plants go mute.

Jane's SUV is surrounded by parked yellow flatbed trailers. The dump trucks and bulldozers

carried to the site are now in a loud steeplechase on the razed property that is trashed with broken elder trees, clumps of roots, young branches just showing their spring greenery. We hear mighty trunks pushed to the ground and see birds flying in fear, away from the destruction, chased by monsters with motors.

Once inside our vehicle, Jane turns on the air conditioning and passes me a bottle of water, the temperature of bath water.

I am crying and feel I have failed. No, says Jane. We did what we could. We can not save them all.

“Let me show you something,” says Jane, as she opens the glove compartment and takes out several wrinkled brown envelopes marked by dull pencil with dates, locations and scientific Latin names. I hear soft rattling inside when she shakes the envelopes.

“Seeds,” Jane says simply. “You are holding the future. Seeds, seed banks and propagation, that’s the key. That’s really what we have collected today.”

I cradle the seeds in my hands. Jane starts the car.

Plant Identification

butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)

cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)

elderberry (*Sambucus Canadensis*)

forget-me-not (*Myosotis sylvatica*)

ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*)

goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*)

hispid buttercup (*Ranunculus hispidus*)

jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*)

large-flowered trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*)

mayapple (*Podophyllum*)

pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*)

Queen Anne’s lace (*Ammi majus*)

spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*)

squirrel-corn (*Dicentra canadensis*)

Virginia bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*)
white snakeroot (*Eupatorium rugosum*)
white trout-lily (*Erythronium albidum*)
wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*)
wood nettle (*Laportea canadensis*)