

Annals of the Wild Life Reserve

The Writings of Eloise Butler



The Fragrance of the Wild Garden - 1915

Barring the malodorous Skunk Cabbage which had to be introduced into my bog, the equally offensive Carrion Flower [photo at right] which is forgiven on account of the picturesque vine and big bells of dark purple berries, and the unspeakable fungus, the stinkhorn, tolerated as a curious freak of the vegetable kingdom, at all times the garden dispenses sweet fragrance.

First, there is the woody smell so delightful in the spring when the wilderness is free from snow. The tamaracks yield a slight aromatic blend to this, leafless as they are. My juvenile evergreens -- all introduced -- will increase this quality in the future. The liverworts coating the ground in the bog, with their flat, leaf-like growths, have a cloying sweet odor, so individual that they could be recognized by that alone.

We know from afar when the willow catkins merge from furry pussies into yellow flower clusters, as well as the bees which are attracted by the honey-like smell that comes from the little nectar scale situated at the base of each staminate or pistillate flower above each downy bract. [photo below].



The odor of plum and cherry blossoms, is reminiscent of their fruits, while one is almost overpowered by the fragrance of the hawthorns -- spectacular features of the garden when covered with their fleece of bloom.

Most agreeable and sweetest of all is the small white violet which carpets the swamp. The Canadian Violet, introduced in large numbers, is also delicately fragrant. But for delicacy and sweetness I think every flower must yield the palm to *Linnaea* [*Linnaea borealis* - Twinflower]. I have not yet succeeded in naturalizing Trailing Arbutus, which is perhaps a more universal favorite. Our showy orchid [Showy Lady's-slipper] might compete with this in beauty and richness of perfume.

It is impossible to describe an odor. Comparison with other odors fails in indicating the individual quality, which is always *sui generis* [of his, her, its particular kind]. For instance, the odor of cypripediums reminds me of that of strawberries, but this conveys no true idea of it.

For spicy odors we resort to the rootstalks of Sarsaparilla, *Aralia nudiflorum* [*Aralia nudicaulis* L.], Wild Ginger, and Sweet Flag with its peculiar tang. Their leaves hold them in less degree. Unfortunately, sassafras is not a native of Minnesota.

Who does not love the fragrance of wild grape blossoms? And again that of the ripe fruit? It would be interesting to determine how much of our enjoyment in tasting fruits comes from their pleasing fragrance. Now and then I find a fragrant specimen of Marsh Fern, *Aspidium thelypteris* [*Thelypteris palustris*], and at times the Interrupted Fern is slightly fragrant. Very delightful is the odor of the beautiful *Dicksonia* -- introduced -- [Hay-scented Fern - *Dennstaedtia punctilobula*] my favorite fern and also Thoreau's!

After a rain, we sniff the air with delight, saying, "Oh yes, there's a balm in Gilead!" as we pass a young balsam poplar that has been planted near one of the foot paths. Favorite visitors are allowed to bruise a leaf to extract the perfumes of Sweet Gale, Benzoin (introduced [1907]) [*Lindera benzoin* - Northern Spicebush], Wild Bergamot, Wild Anise, *Galium circaezans* [Licorice Bedstraw], *Dalea alopecuroides* (elusively sweet) [*Dalea leporina* - Foxtail Prairie Clover], Mountain Mint (*Pycnanthemum*) [photo at right] which must nearly equal the European Sweet Basil in fragrance, and Aromatic Sumach (introduced) [Fragrant Sumac]. Some also like to revive the memories of childhood by inhaling the stronger odors of Tansy, Catnip, and Ground Ivy (all naturalized species). The common Wild Mint [*Mentha arvensis*], makes its presence known as we walk over it in the meadows.



Pungent and less agreeable odors we obtain from bruising the fruit of Mountain Ash and the leaves of the Pasque Flower, *Anemone patens*; Prairie Clover, *Petalostemum* [*Dalea candida* (white) and *D. purpurea* (purple)]; and Wormwood, *Artemisia*.

June, of course, is redolent with wild roses and the blossoms of locust. In September, the meadows abound in the lovely, sweet-scented ladies' tresses, *Spiranthes* [several species]. Lastly, in the fall, we are greeted by a compound of agreeable odors as we walk scuffling the leaves under our feet. Of the many plants she mentioned, here are links to information sheets containing photos and descriptions.

Notes: Since Eloise Butler's time, the scientific names of plants and the classification of plant families has undergone extensive revision. In brackets within the text, have been added when necessary, the revised scientific name for the references she used in her article. Nomenclature is based on the latest published information from *Flora of North America*, USDA and the *Annotated Checklist of the Vascular Flora of Minnesota*. Other information in brackets may add clarification to what she is saying.

Photo of Eloise Butler, ca. 1920, at top of page courtesy Minneapolis Public Library. Other photos ©G D Bebeau. The text of this article is one of a number of short essays that Eloise Butler wrote while curator of the Garden that after her death were collected in a series titled *Annals of the Wild Life Reserve*, but were not published. The Wild Botanic Garden in Wirth Park, became the "Native Plant Reserve" and was then renamed the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden in 1929.