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Spring Herbwalks! Karin Morcinek

For those who love to go for walks in the forests and meadows to see the wild flowers in bloom, here is a calendar with reference to approximate blooming dates. This list does not include all the wild flowers, but a selection of plants that are used as herbs (medicinal/edible). Of interest, I have included some poisonous plants as well to keep you on your toes! Blooming dates can vary in different localities, this reference is for Toronto and vicinity.

APRIL - Flowers to look for include:

Bloodroot - *Sanguinaria canadensis*
Coltsfoot - *Tussilago farfara*

Prickly Ash - *Zanthoxylum americanum*

EARLY MAY

Skunk Cabbage - *Symplocarpus foetidus*

Wild Ginger - *Asarum canadense*

Violets - *Viola* sp.

Dandelion - *Taraxacum officinalis*

Blue Cohosh - *Caulophyllum thalictroides*

MID MAY

Shepherds Purse - *Capsella bursa-pastoris*

Trilliums - *Trillium* sp.

Marsh Marigolds - *Caltha palustris*

Ground Ivy - *Glechoma hederacea*

LATE MAY

Common Chickweed - *Stellaria medica*

Mandrake - *Podophyllum peltatum*

White Baneberry - *Actaea alba*

Red Baneberry - *Actaea rubra*

Solomon Seal - *Polygonatum pubescens*

Hawthorn - *Crateagus* sp.

Chokecherry - *Prunus virginiana*

False Elder - *Sambucus pubens*

I urge you, to make sure that you have identified the plant correctly. Knowledge of basic botany is essential, along with a field guide book that will aid you in proper identification. This requires practise and patience and attending herbwalks conducted by an experienced herbalist, will advance you further in this study.

It is also very important never to over pick the herbs, beginners tending to do this, being over-enthusiastic. You can quickly eradicate a species over a short period of time and then wonder later, why you cannot find that plant. I encourage you to cultivate the wild flowers as many of them are easy to propagate. You will be doing us all the good service of increasing supply, as well as introducing new and rare species to your area.

One of the harbingers of Spring is the flowering of Bloodroot and Coltsfoot. The white, delicate flowers of Bloodroot bloom very quickly, so do not be disappointed when you see the petals already fallen on the ground. It is not very common in many areas. Although it looks delicate, the root is potent and not often used by herbalists today. A bright red juice will stain your hands when the root is cut.

Coltsfoot's yellow flowers bloom earlier than the Dandelion. Both look similar but upon closer inspection the reddish scaly stem will differentiate between the two. Also the flowers bloom before the leaves appear. Coltsfoot prefers disturbed, open spaces such as gravel pits, creek banks and road sides. This is a very useful herb, the flowers can be made into wine or syrup, and the leaves make a pleasant tasting tea. Excellent for expelling mucus from the lungs in cases of asthma, colds and other pulmonary conditions.

Another early bloomer is the Prickly Ash with its inconspicuous greenish-yellowish flowers. This shrub or small tree bears thorns, and is a more effective barrier than a barbed-wire fence. Do not confuse this shrub with a Locust tree. The bark is used mainly as a stimulant for poor circulation. It is one of the few herbs that creates a tingling - like sensation in the mouth (some others are the Echinaceas and Aconite).

By May 1st two most unusual flowers have appeared; the Skunk Cabbage with its purplish inflorescence and the Wild Ginger with its reddish brown cup shaped flower. The Skunk Cabbage smells skunky when bruised. It is a very distinctive plant of the marshlands with huge cabbage-like leaves that grow up to 2 feet long. The roots have been used as an expectorant and combined with other herbs for spasmodic conditions. It is an acquired taste and belongs in the family Arum (Araceae) which also includes the Jack-in-the-Pulpit. Arum comes from the Arabian word ar, meaning fire. The fresh roots contain calcium oxalate crystals which when eaten, cause an intense burning sensation in the mouth. So here is one example of a herb (Skunk cabbage) that should be thoroughly dried before using.

Wild Ginger is a jewel of the woods, newcomers are delighted when they smell and taste the ginger roots. Makes a good syrup being diaphoretic, very warming but emetic in large quantities. This is one wild flower that will grow well in the garden.

The romantic Violets are familiar to everyone. Few people are aware that the leaves of the blue flowered varieties can be made into an ointment. Superb for cleansing old wounds, they have strong drawing-out properties. Do not pick all the leaves from a Violet plant for it is slow growing. The Birdfoot Violet (*Viola pedata*) is rare, so please, try not to pick this variety.

At this time the first Dandelions are blooming. Before they bloom, harvest the leaves and eat them. Together with Violet leaves, this will be your first wild green salad - along with a handful of chives from the garden. An excellent spring tonic and highly nutritious. Your Dandelion roots should have been harvested by now and made into a tincture or dried. Spring roots are bitter tasting and good for the liver whereas the Fall roots are sweet tasting and good for blood sugar conditions.

Blue Cohosh is sometimes tricky to find. It blends in well with the Wild Sarsaparilla and Red and White Baneberries. All these plants produce berries and they all bloom in Spring, growing in shady woodlands. With practise you will be able to see the bluish hue of the Cohosh, the tiny flowers greenish-yellow, the berries dark blue. The roots are used for female disorders, the Native peoples appropriately naming this plant Squaw Root or Papoose Root. Caution is required with this herb. It effects the blood pressure and is toxic in larger doses.

By now I'm wondering if I can complete the list of herbs, there are so many to mention! It is the middle of May, and the Shepherds Purse is growing strong and will bloom from now till fall time. This herb has a distinctive sulphur-like scent. Very popular among midwives for its astringency, it is a herb that is best used fresh.

Birth Root or the Trillium is a delightful spring flower symbolizing gladness and the fresh hope of Spring. North American natives used the root to strengthen the uterus and aid childbirth. It is illegal to pick this plant, it being the provincial emblem of Ontario. Try growing the Trillium in your garden.

I've included the Marsh Marigolds because when the vibrant yellow flowers are blooming, this is a sure sign that the fiddleheads from the Ostrich fern (*Pteretis pensylvanica*) are soon ready to be picked. Please do not over pick and do not confuse it with the Bracken fern which is not as palatable.

I'm positive you will be mowing your lawn now. For those who have a wild cultured lawn with everything growing in it, I'm sure you will be cutting the Ground Ivy as well. Low growing, this mint variety with purple flowers has a distinctive musky-like scent.

The Common Chickweed is another lawn loving plant with tiny white flowers. Both of these herbs are astringent, the Chickweed also having demulcent properties.

Of course there are the poisonous plants! How about the Red and White Baneberry. Their berries are very bright and showy, but certainly not edible. I might as well include the False Elder shrub, whose flowers are also white. The birds will eat the red berries but don't you try them. It is important to distinguish between the False and the medicinal Common Elder shrub (*Sambucus canadensis*). Basically, the Common Elder have flat-topped flower clusters and purplish-black berries while the red berried False Elder has elongate flower clusters and blooms way before the Common Elder.

A graceful lily, the Solomon's Seal grows in shady woodlands, and with its greenish white bell-like flowers it is quite attractive. The rhizomes have been used at one time in cosmetics for toning the complexion and also eaten as a starchy food. I find it too pretty to pick, but if you grow this plant in your garden you will have ample supply. Often found growing close by is the False Solomon's Seal (*Smilacina racemosa*), its roots are demulcent and expectorant. Both of these plants are rarely used these days.

By the last week in May most of the fruit trees are blooming. To refresh your memory it was 25 degrees C on May 30 of last year. The Hawthorn shrub is blooming now, a very useful herb. Too bad the red berries are often wormy, you can never pick enough. It is a popular European remedy, (a heart tonic) and is rich in vitamin C. Chokecherry bark is another heart remedy but different in its effect. It is not a remedy to take for a long period of time. The bark is also used in cough remedies for its anti-spasmodic effect.

So I hope I have given you an idea of what you can find in bloom at Springtime. Remember, it is your responsibility to identify these herbs correctly taking care with their preparation and using the proper dosage. It is important that we learn to recognize the flowers and plants that are found in nature, in order to become more self-reliant and in tune with our environment. Plants are a part of the life force and only when we become aware of their presence in their natural habitat will we be able to share in and absorb, their true power and vitality.