

Autumn Wildflowers

By Susan Camp

By late summer every year, I begin to look forward to the cool mornings and evenings, the slanting autumn light, and the changing colors of the leaves. I also enjoy the colorful autumn wildflowers, some native, some introduced or escaped from suburban gardens, which grow and bloom along the roadsides of Gloucester County.

A few weeks ago, I was asked by Sue Keys, the Gazette-Journal proofreader, to write an article identifying some of the local wildflowers. I am not a wildflower expert, but part of the fun of writing this column is doing the research for each topic. I keep folders, either on the computer or in hard copy, of the articles, websites, and books I have used as resources.

Several days ago, I received some terrific wildflower photographs Sue had taken. I decided to feature four of the wildflowers. The others will have to wait for another column.

Cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) is a North American native perennial that grows in marshes, wet woods and meadows, and along stream and creek banks. Cardinal flowers can reach a height of 2-7 feet. The leaves are toothed, up to 8 inches long. The brilliant red flowers grow in clusters up to 20 inches long. The bright white stamen tip at the center of each flower provides a striking contrast to the intense red of the blossoms. Hummingbirds, which feed on the cardinal flower nectar, are the only pollinators. Native American tribes used cardinal flower roots and leaves to make tea. The leaves were dried and smoked as a tobacco substitute. Cardinal flower contains several alkaloids that are potentially toxic.

Coastal plain or three-nerved Joe-Pye weed (*Eutrochium dubium*, formerly *Eupatorium*) is a hardy, native perennial. It favors sandy, acidic soil and grows in marshes, swamps, and roadside ditches. Joe-Pye weed grows to a height of 2-5 feet. The feathery plumes of pale pinkish-purple attract several varieties of butterflies. Joe-Pye weed has a long history of medicinal use by Native Americans and early settlers. It blooms from late summer through late fall.

The dainty Asiatic dayflower (*Commelina communis*) is an annual that was introduced to North America from Asia, escaped into the environment, and is now listed as an invasive plant in several states, including Virginia. It prefers moist soil. It is also known as mouse-ears, because of the unusual configuration of two large, rounded electric blue petals and one nondescript white petal. Each flower lasts only a day. Asiatic dayflower is used in Chinese medicine to reduce fever and inflammation.

About 120 species of goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.) exist, primarily in North America. It is difficult to differentiate between species, because the plants appear similar. Goldenrod, a hardy perennial blooms from late summer through mid-October. The tall plants with clusters of bright, yellow blossoms are found in fields, ditches, and along roadsides. Contrary to long-held belief,

goldenrod does not cause “hay fever”. Ragweed (*Ambrosia* spp.), which blooms at the same time, has lightweight pollen that is easily dispersed by wind and can cause allergic rhinitis (itchy, runny nose and eyes). Goldenrod pollen is heavy and sticky; insects are the primary pollinators.

There are many other autumn wildflowers blooming along the roadsides, lanes, and fields of Gloucester County. Slow down and enjoy their beauty. They will fade soon enough. Please do not dig up or destroy wildflowers on public land.

Some good resources for wildflowers are the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Plants Database (plants.usda.gov/); the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center (www.wildflower.org/plants/); and the John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society (vnps.org/johnclayton/). *Wildflowers & Grasses of Virginia's Coastal Plain* (2013) by Helen Hamilton and Gustavus Hall and the classic *Wildflowers of Tidewater Virginia* (1982) by Oscar W. Gupton and Fred C. Swope both provide excellent color photographs of native and introduced species of wildflowers.

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