A Wild Time: What the pandemic wildflowers showed me

I went from being the toddler who dismembered a passionflower to examine all its parts to an adult who writes articles and books on natural history, horticulture and botany, and gives talks on these topics. Then the pandemic came, the state where I now live, New York, shut down amid some of the highest infection rates per capita in the world. All my gigs with garden clubs and at botanical gardens—which took me around the country and even into Canada—were canceled.

Spring came, I stayed home, and I had no work, that’s the long and short of it. I closed my laptop, left my reference-book-jammed little home office, and went outside. I began to take the dog on longer and longer walks, particularly along the Erie Canal bike trail, which runs through our little Upstate village. With no audience but the dog, I began to observe and comment on our surroundings.

The trail runs east-west, parallel to the canal, and has been in use for a long time. Many parts of it are the old rail bed, some is former towpath. In modern times, bicyclists and walkers enjoy it in warm weather and snowmobilers and cross-country skiers use it in the winter months. It’s not a wilderness trail, is my point, but rather a heavily used recreational thoroughfare. A lot of educational and professional experiences in the world of plants has caused me see my natural surroundings with a savvy eye. Not surprisingly, the trailside vegetation here is a mish-mash. The area is and has been for a long time, to use an ecological term, “highly impacted.” A common phenomenon in the world of plants is that people, animals, and vehicles move plants around and into new areas—all sorts of weeds spread easily. Water also moves and mixes things up. Disheartening, when you know what you are looking at, because the original ecosystem gets overwhelmed.

Every year, there’s more Japanese knotweed or, as some people call it, Japanese bamboo, for its thick, towering stems are hollow. An aggressive grower originally from Asia, it is currently a poster child for “problem invasive plant.” One of my most popular presentations, “The War of the Weeds,” highlights it. When I put a slide of a robust patch up on the screen, the audience shifts uneasily in their seats, recognizing it, often expressing fear and loathing with gasps, growls, groans. Calmly, I tell them its current botanical name is Fallopia japonica …. I mention its previous botanical names (Reynoutria japonica, Polygonum cuspidatum) and its other common names and then I joke, “would YOU trust a person with this many aliases? Clearly up to no good!” But this plant’s exponential spread into local habitats is not a joking matter. It’s a beast.

Those who maintain the Erie Canal trail seem to come through periodically with a bushhog and chainsaws. They chop back the thickets of Japanese knotweed but, inevitably, it returns (our winters kill the topgrowth, but new sprouts easily emerge from last year’s dry stems). It laughs at herbicides (which I don’t believe are in use in this particular setting). Also, Japanese honeysuckle, a shrub that can grow in thin soil, on embankments, in sun or shade, is rampant. In places where Japanese knotweed isn’t elbowing out almost every other plant, including tree saplings, this one is. *“The twin riders of the habitat apocalypse,”* I mutter dourly to an audience of myself.

*“What a disaster this trail is,”* I continue, louder, but my dog isn’t listening to my laments. He’s galloped along ahead of me, off-leash, happy and carefree.

Around the next bed, I run into an acquaintance, also out for a walk, and she snaps me out of my gloomy mood. Standing a safe distance away, she flings her arms out wide as though to hug our greening-up surroundings. *“Isn’t this fantastic?!”* she enthuses. “*Everything is so full of life, so green, so lush! Why, I almost feel like the air is BUZZING with…”* she gropes for the word she wants*…”photosynthesis?”* I guess. *“YES!”* She looks appraisingly at me, and adds, *“Oh yes, right, you’re the plant lady, you know all this stuff. Well! I’m off! Isn’t this just so MARVELOUS?!”* she moves on, calling back exuberantly over her shoulder, *“Enjoy!!”*

The dog and I resume our hike. Head bowed, I can easily see still more emerging Japanese knotweed on both sides of the trail.

Head bowed, I also see…oh hey, what’s this? A red trillium?! Another…? A patch? Under and beyond the domain of the invasive-beast plants. A remnant of the native plant community…or a plucky return? I wonder. I don’t know. I hadn’t been looking in previous years. I’d been on the road. Or sitting in my home office, writing about plants. I get out my phone and take some photos. The dog circles back to see why I’ve paused, and promptly sits on a patch. *“No! Get up, no!”* I scold him, feeling protective of the little beauties. *“They’re called wake-robins,”* I tell him, ever in instructional mode. *“I wonder why,”* I straighten up and entertain a question I’d never pondered before this moment. *“Because…they wake with the robins?”*

There is a class of wildflowers botanists call “spring ephemerals,” a term that has a whiff of romance and nostalgia. Fleeting beauty. Trilliums are among the earliest to appear in this part of the world. A lot of plants do not flower in shade (ask any gardener who’s tried to landscape a shady yard), but these grow even in deep woods as well as on the margins of trails, grabbing what sun they can before the trees leaf out.

Something shifts in me the day I spot the wake robins. I start looking more carefully on every walk we take, literally scanning the ground, watching where I put my feet, leaving the trail here and there to investigate something that catches my eye under the trees, beyond the burgeoning Japanese knotweed. In the slanting dim light of the forest, I spy the white flowers of hepaticas (with their strange purple liver-shaped leaves, hence the name). Then I find bloodroot leaves, which although round-ish, emerge held rather vertical, cupping and protecting gorgeous but frail white flowers. I become a better “spotter.” I start ignoring the plants that caused my earlier distress. I am in full Monitoring Mode.

Another day, I spy wee little white flowers whose petals, when I knelt to look more closely, were streaked with pink. They looked familiar but I didn’t know or remember their name—it’s like not being about to put a name to a familiar face. So I took a photo and cracked open my dusty wildflower guides back in my home office. I hadn’t thumbed through them in years. I’d forgotten what I once knew. They were “spring beauty,” Claytonia virginica. They were everywhere…for about a week…then they vanished. One of my reference books notes that they “grow from a deep-seated tuber,” a fact that comforts me. They’ll be back, no matter what goes on overhead between now and next spring.

I had joined the spring-ephemeral parade. Nearly every day I’d go looking, by myself or with the dog, and nearly every day, I’d see new arrivals. Trout lilies! White trilliums! Coltsfoot! Mayapples! Ragged robins! Yellow wood violets! Canada anemones! I took pictures. I looked them up, I learned more, I shared what I learned on my Instagram. I spent more time outdoors this spring, and more time poring over my wildflower books, than I have in years. Though small and seemingly fragile, the spring ephemerals had an air of determination and purpose about them. It gives me hope that, despite their highly impacted settings, they can carry on. Certainly the situation is not as dire or bleak as I used to think.

The pandemic wildflowers gave me some gifts. They gave me a passage into really seeing, studying and enjoying “my own backyard,” something I’d neglected for years—or, to be honest, judged unworthy of my attention or affection. And their progression…some fading away, new ones coming on, leaves emerging, followed later by flowers…gave me a welcome sense of time passing. All this, at a time when the rest of the world seemed stuck in neutral or, as some people have said, “days after days repeating, like the movie Groundhog Day.”

And one more gift. The wildflowers, I know, have been there all along and I hope will abide. I learned—or remembered—that nature does carry on. Despite aggressive non-native invasive plants, despite human intervention, neglect and ignorance. I thought I knew what I was looking at around here. Now the plant lady, humbled, has learned that there is so much more.

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