



Ozaukee Gardener

.....Elizabeth O'Connell.....



Wildflowers abound on Interurban Trail

My husband and I frequently bike the Ozaukee Interurban Trail, where the wildflower display right now rivals anything in area gardens. It's worth the time to walk or bike and see the flowers that are springing up after the recent rains.

In the boggy culverts lining the trail, bright gold marsh marigolds mix with the emerging skunk cabbage leaves. We have a couple of these marigolds growing next to our ornamental pond, but they're far more impressive when they're clustered by the dozens in the moist soil.

Farther along, colonies of bloodroot climb the slopes. The plants get their common name from the toxic sap that's stored in their fleshy orange-red roots. The blossoms are short-lived. As soon as the flowers are fertilized the large, flat leaves that have been wrapped around the plants' stems unfurl. The bloodroot flowers are supposed to be a favorite food of deer, so I wonder how many more we'd see if we didn't also see white-tails bounding along the path.

Other areas are dotted with wild geraniums sporting small, five-petaled white or light pink blossoms that look like a kindergarten's idea of a flower. In drier spots, rue anemones form a low groundcover under the trees. Their flower stalks are showing above the foliage right now but their tiny lavender panicles won't open for another week or so.

The most spectacular flower display is near the turning point of our regular ride. Under the bare trees, several acres on either side of the path are carpeted with dogtoothed violets and shooting-stars. The violets are yellow and have red-speckled leaves that give them their other common name, trout lily. Weaving among them are the white and lavender shooting stars with an occasional cluster of geranium blossoms as an accent. It's fantastic to see the flowers running on and on as far as the eye can see.

Some of these plants are ephemeral. Their leaves will disappear as soon as the trees above them fill out, but by then they'll have stored enough energy to produce flowers again next spring. Others, like the geraniums and trout lilies, will become part of the ground cover under the trees, indistinct greenery to passing pedestrians and cyclists.

I saw my first white trillium flowers Monday. If there are hungry deer in the area, they'll disappear quickly. No bluebells yet, but their buds may be too small to spot as we speed past (a relative term when I'm doing the pedaling). In our yard the few bluebell buds the rabbits haven't already feasted on are too small to see unless I'm down on my knees looking for them.

While I pretend I have a woodland in my back yard, the truth is that I grow only a few of each of these plants. Even the most plentiful of my colonies of bloodroot take up just a foot or yard at most. They only hint at what the flowers look like in real woods or wetlands where hundreds or thousands of plants grow naturally.

These wildflower displays don't last long. Since we aren't in Paradise, you have to look past the garlic mustard, dandelions and trash to see them. Some trail users are tackling the trash issue. The plants blossom, set seed and disappear quickly, but the spectacle is amazing while it lasts.

We've been on the Interurban Trail since the peepers singing in the empty trees announced spring was on the way. Now the toads are trilling, the birds are calling and the wood violets are starting to open. There's something new to see every day whether you walk or cycle.

O'Connell and her husband Tom Hudson garden at their historic home on Grand Avenue in Port Washington and are members of the Port Washington Garden Club. Comments or questions may be e-mailed to mail@portgardenclub.org.