

Spring Goes Wild

By Jill Roberts • Photos by Jill Roberts



The first full week of May is designated annually as *National Wildflower Week*. In addition to adding nature's first dose of color, native wildflowers are essential to the ecosystem. They provide seeds, insects and other food for wildlife. Additionally, their root systems can help stabilize the soil to prevent erosion, and hold nutrients that can improve soil health and water quality. They are also a critical habitat for bees and other pollinators, who are responsible for 35% of the world's food crops, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Wildflowers are native to areas with conditions perfect for them to thrive. Therefore, many are not common to private landscapes and gardens, which make them a rare delight to spot when out in nature. Some varieties are at risk of extinction,

and many are extremely sensitive or even poisonous to human touch. Consequently, if you come across a native wildflower, it's respectful to let it be for other hikers and future generations to see.

Pink lady slippers, trilliums, and dandelions—yes, dandelions, are three of springs earliest wild perennials. Like many native wildflowers, these three offer benefits to both humans and wildlife.

Also known as a *Moccasin Flower*, the *Pink Lady Slipper*, is a member of the orchid family. The plant can live up to 20 years or more, but can take many years to bare a flower. It produces an elegant pink blossom between May and July, and is known



to have many medicinal properties. According to Native American folklore, each plant sprouts from the footprints of a young tribal maiden, who while gathering herbs to heal her diseased tribe, lost her life from the harsh winter woods.

Trillium, also known as *Indian Balm*, is a plant belonging to the lily family. It grows in many colors and varieties, but always with the distinction of three petals. It makes an appearance between April and June, with some varieties in blossom before robins return to their nests. Trillium root is known for its many medicinal properties and is referred to in folklore as the female herb, for its many benefits specific to the female reproductive system.

Dandelions are a native wildflower with an unfair reputation as a pesky weed. When in fact, they work to fertilize the soil by



aerating the earth. Through its deep root system, a dandelion can pull nutrients to the surface, which provides benefit to other surrounding plants. For this reason, dandelions are the first plant to occupy disturbed lands after a wildfire. Dandelions have been valued for centuries as an herbal medicine and nutritional supplement. Their subtle, yet distinct flavor in tea, can be used to treat or prevent a range of ailments. They also provide a first source of pollen for bees.

In many areas, a permit is required to collect any plant material, or seed, from state or federal land. If you're interested in propagating native wildflowers to

a private landscape or garden, many are available through local garden nurseries.