

neighborhood naturalist

Nature you can find in town and the nearby countryside

Corvallis, Oregon

Spring 2007

Weedy Salad Greens and Wild Opium

article and illustrations by Don Boucher

Like many nature lovers, I cherish native plants and I have set out to learn the native plants of my region. I've had to familiarize myself with common weeds in order to distinguish them from the natives. I've discovered that weeds are sometimes delightful wildflowers. For me, picking quantities of native wildflowers may not only be unethical but also unnecessary. I've dazzled friends and family with glorious bouquets of the prettiest weedy wildflowers. Since introduced weeds are abundant, they are also readily available for collection and use as food, medicine or other purposes. Isn't it a good idea to know what *not* to pick? Learn your local weeds and enjoy their many benefits.

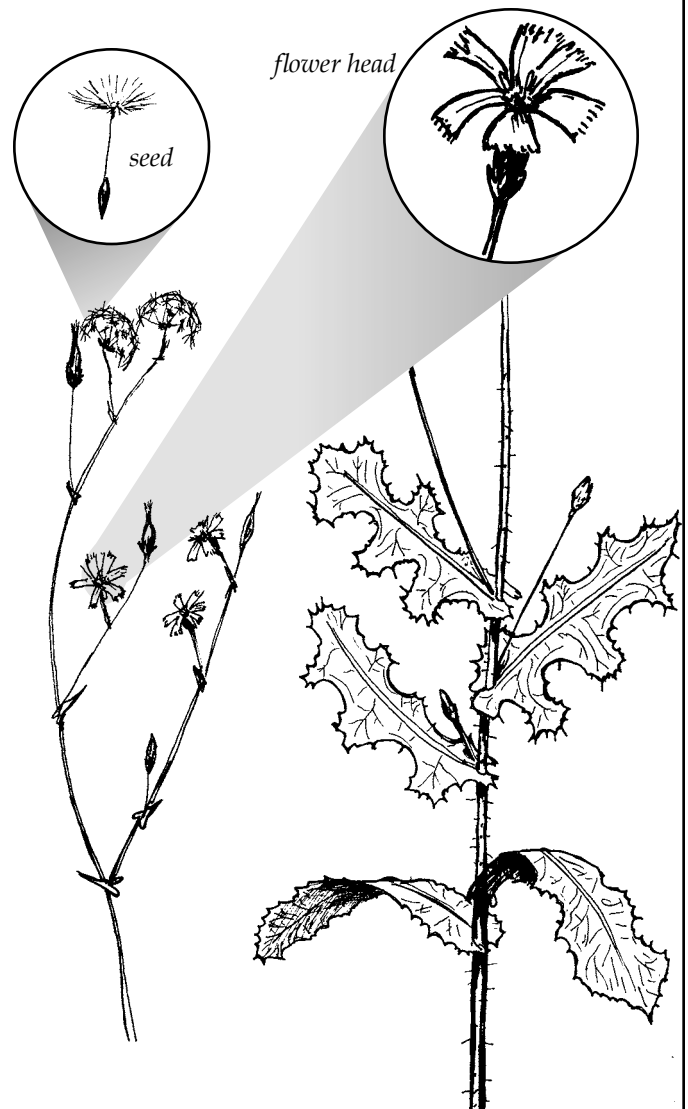
Garden lettuce and some other salad greens are descendants of common weeds. These are related to Dandelions and with similar flowers and seeds with downy umbrellas. Lettuces and Dandelions are in the larger family of plants, Asteraceae, which is often called the Sunflower or Aster family. In our area there are dozens of plants species in this family. Most have edible or medical properties. Only a few species are toxic but not very dangerous in small quantities. The most common of these toxic Asteraceae plants are Tansy Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) and Common Groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*). Always identify with certainty any plant before consumption. Another precaution is to make sure that your edible plant hasn't been subject to dangerous pollution either in the soil or on the surface of the plant.

Garden lettuce and some common wild varieties are in the *Lactuca* genus. These wild lettuces are nutritious and edible but, unlike their garden relations, all are bitter to some degree. To me they resemble Dandelions in flavor. Readers Holly and Bert Davis publish a newsletter called *Dwelling Portably*, where they feature one of their favorite wild relatives of lettuce, Gosmore (*Hypochoeris radicata*). This weedy plant is also known as False Dandelion and Holly and Bert find, under some conditions, it can taste less bitter than Dandelion. Gosmore, Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) and wild lettuce species are least bitter as tender

Prickly Lettuce

Lactuca serriola

Plants 18in to 6ft tall. Undersides of leaves prickly, especially the central vein. Sparse prickles on stem. Lower leaves clasp around stem. Flower heads pale yellow. Brownish, parachute-like seeds. The plant is sometimes called "Compass Plant" because the leaves tend to point north and south. Milky sap. Open waste places and roadsides.



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Lettuce *continued from front page*

sprouting leaves during early spring. I find they are best used sparsely in a salad with milder greens. Young plants can be difficult to identify, and field guides aren't much help since they typically illustrate mature plants. Observe young plants in early spring and take note of what they develop into later in the season. Not until the following spring will you be able to apply what you've learned.

Garden lettuce and wild varieties in the *Lactuca* genus contain the compounds *lactucopicrin* and *lactucin*, which resemble opium medicinally. Although not potent, the milky sap from mature plants can be collected, dried and used as a mild sedative and cough suppressant. Species have varying potency with garden lettuce being the weakest. In Europe, *Lactuca* species have been historically regarded as Wild Opium.

The two common species of wild lettuce in the Willamette Valley are Wall Lettuce (*Lactuca muralis*) and Prickly Lettuce (*L. serriola*). Willow Lettuce (*L. saligna*) is less common. All three are introduced, annual plants, which disperse seeds and die within one growing season. Tall Blue Lettuce (*L. biennis*) is a native plant and a bien-

nial, which means it makes seeds and dies after the second growing season. Tall Blue Lettuce is rare or largely extirpated from the Willamette Valley. All varieties of garden lettuce are derived from one species, *L. sativa*.

Suggested Field Guides

Northwest Weeds: The Ugly and Beautiful Villains of Fields, Gardens, and Roadsides. By Ronald J. Taylor. 1990 Mountain Press Publishing Company

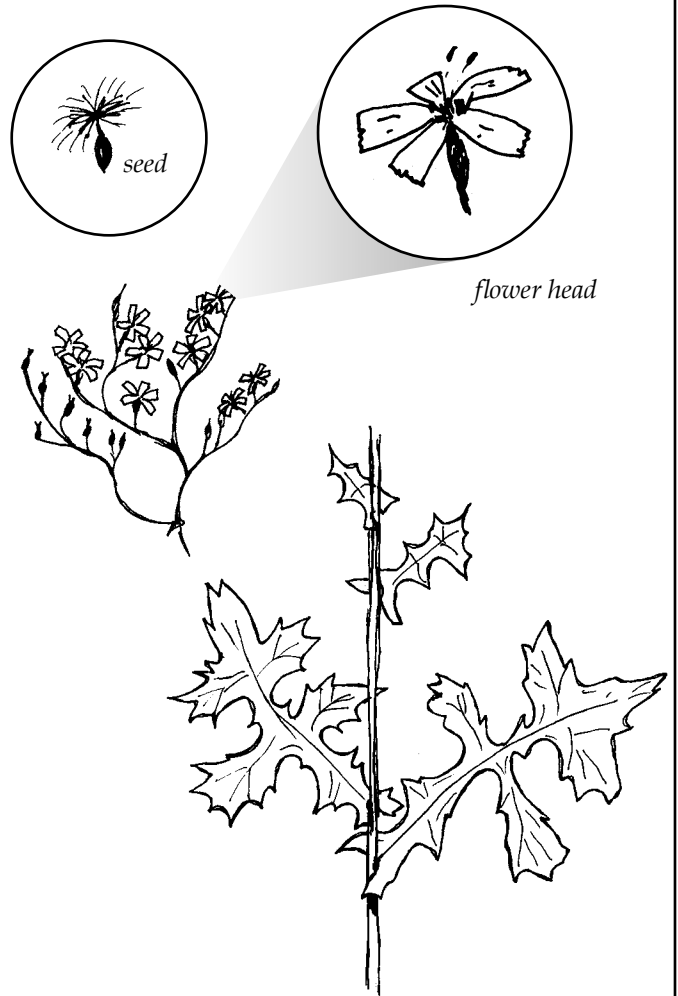
Wild Edible Plants of the Western United States. By Donald R. Kirk and Janice Kirk. 1970 Naturegraph Publishers

Guide to Wild Foods and Useful Plants. By Christopher Nyerges. 1999 Chicago Review Press, Inc.

Wall Lettuce

Lactuca muralis

Plants 12 - 30in tall. Large lower leaves few and clasping on stem. Upper leaves tiny. Flower heads yellow with five ray flowers. Seeds have a short beak with many white bristles. Milky sap. Prefers shady, moist areas. 🌿



**neighborhood
naturalist**

Neighborhood Naturalist promotes interest about nature in backyards, parks and neighborhoods.

Submissions:

This is a newsletter that caters to nature enthusiasts. Any article suggestion, story, poem or artwork which celebrates nature in the Willamette Valley will be considered for publication. The newsletter publishes 4 times a

year around the Solstices and Equinoxes. Send your submissions two weeks in advance. Contact info below:

Subscribe

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Naturalist's Calendar

article and photography by Lisa Millbank

The gradual changing of the seasons has great significance for all living things in our temperate climate. Each organism responds to day length, moisture, and temperature to optimize its survival and reproduction. To better understand the seasonal events in the lives of our neighboring critters, plants, and fungi, I started recording significant observations in a calendar. To date there are over 350 entries in the calendar, with many more to come. Here is a sample of what to expect this spring.

Late March

Look and listen for **Ospreys** returning from their winter home on the Pacific coast of Mexico. Males will be calling loudly in their display flights. **Great Blue Herons** nest in communal rookeries; a good one to watch is at the south end of Willamette Park in Corvallis. Look in the tall Black Cottonwoods on the east riverbank before the emerging leaves hide the nests. **Bigleaf Maple's** edible hanging clusters of blossoms appear.



Bigleaf Maple blossoms



Great Blue Heron

Early April

One of the first native butterflies to emerge from its overwintering chrysalis is the charming **Sara Orangetip**. Although **Rufous Hummingbirds** have whirred their teeny little wings all the way from Mexico, the males are soon feeling spunky enough for their daring courtship flights. In lower-elevation mixed woodlands, listen for **Ruffed Grouse** drumming; the sound reminds me of a two-stroke engine starting up.



Sara Orangetip

Mid-April

Our two beautiful **camas** species (*Camassia quamash* and *C. leichtlinii*) are blooming now. From southern South

America come the **Cliff Swallows**, who build their mud nests under eaves and bridges around towns and swoop for insects with other swallows. **Tall Larkspur** grows vivid blue flower stalks up to four feet high in the moist, rich soil of wooded streamsides.

Late April

Purple **Tough-leaf Iris** abounds on hillsides and in open woods. From central Mexican forests come **Western Tanagers**, with a three-syllable *pri-i-kit* call and a raspy robin-like song, and **Black-headed Grosbeaks**, with a sharp *pik* call and a clear, elaborate robin-like song.



Tough-leaf Iris

Early May

Black Cottonwood sheds its cottony seeds in delightful blizzards on breezy days. Go to any sizable marsh to hear the peculiar "pumping" song of male **American Bitterns**. Enchanting us with an ethereal, spiraling song is the **Swainson's Thrush**, a traveler from southwestern Central America.



Western Tiger Swallowtail

Mid-May

Spectacular with its bold black-and-yellow wings, **Western Tiger Swallowtails** visit flowers. Turquoise male

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Naturalist's Calendar

Continued from page 3

Lazuli Buntings sing while rich brown females incubate eggs. They've flown from western Mexico, and a reliable site to see them is Marys River Natural Park in Corvallis. Our rare endemic **Kincaid's Lupine** blooms in scattered locations and is being reintroduced into more areas every year.



Kincaid's Lupine

Late May

Wood Ducks lead flotillas of tiny fuzzy ducklings on quiet ponds and backwaters. The lovely **Lorquin's Admiral** butterfly becomes abundant in some areas; try E.E. Wilson Wildlife Area. The medicinal herb **Yarrow** blooms in grassy areas.

Early June

Our striking orange **Columbia Lily** blooms now, dusting bright orange pollen on bees and flower sniffers alike. Human and avian berry lovers relish tasty **Wild Strawberries**. On open grassy slopes and fields, **Death Camas** produces showy white plumes of flowers.



Wild Strawberry

Mid-June

Thimbleberry ripens and packs a lot of raspberry flavor into a soft cuplike fruit. The European forest plant, **Wall Lettuce**, blooms and releases its tiny parachutes. Our native **Trailing Dewberry** begins to ripen now, and rewards those who brave its thorny vines with a puckery zing of blackberry bliss. ♣

A Lily By Any

Other Name...

Lilies To Look For This Spring

article and photography by Lisa Millbank

Spring brings an array of beautiful lilies to our forests and fields. For most of the year lilies lie dormant under the soil, storing carbohydrates in a corm, bulb or rhizome. When it is time for a forest lily to emerge from its long slumber, a shoot emerges at a remarkable pace, hurrying to catch the light and flower while the trees' leaves are still tight buds.

Traditionally the family Liliaceae was defined as monocotyledonous plants, generally with parallel veins, linear leaves, and flower parts in threes. Many common edible and ornamental plants, such as asparagus, garlic, onion, tulip, crocus, and daffodil were placed in this family.

Now botanists debate the proper classification of many lilies in light of recent genetic studies. Many of our native species featured here are considered for reclassification into different families defined more precisely by their genetic relationships, rather than placed into the catch-all Liliaceae. But regardless of the family into which they may eventually fall, each is an ephemeral gift of springtime. Enjoy each of these exquisite plants during their brief appearance, before they once again retreat to their underground repose.

Trillium



Sessile Trillium
Trillium albidum



Western Trillium
Trillium ovatum

Western Trillium has a single white flower borne on a peduncle, or flower stalk, above its rosette of three plain green leaves. *Sessile Trillium's* flower sits at the junction of its leaves, which are usually mottled. From Polk County northward is a possible third species of trillium, but it may just be a form of *Sessile Trillium*. They begin blooming in mid-March. Ants disperse the seeds of these plants.

Fawn Lily ▶

Erythronium oregonum

This plant blooms in profusion in Avery Park in Corvallis. Mottled leaves frame a stalk of up to five starry cream-colored flowers. Each has a yellow center. In late March they begin to flower.



◀ Columbia Lily

Lilium columbianum

A fabulous speckled orange "tiger lily", this stately plant has large whorls of leaves, topped by numerous flowers.

Avery Park is a great place to see them in early June, but later in summer they are abundant on Marys Peak.

Camas



Small Camas
Camassia quamash

Great Camas
Camassia leichtlinii

Camas bulbs were a staple food for the Kalapuya people, when the flowers colored entire prairies blue. Today it is much less common, but still easy to find and admire. Small Camas has an asymmetrical flower with the lower petal-like structure ("tepal") somewhat apart from the other five. Great Camas has perfect symmetry and its tepals twist together when the flower is beginning to form seeds. Look for camas in mid-April.

False Solomon's-Seals and Wild Lily-of-the-Valley



Large False Solomon's-Seal
Maianthemum racemosum



Star False Solomon's-Seal
Maianthemum stellatum



Wild Lily-of-the-Valley
Maianthemum dilatatum

In rich forest soils you will find this genus. Star False Solomon's-Seal is small but elegant with no more than a dozen small flowers. Large False Solomon's-Seal produces fragrant plumes of flowers. Wild Lily-of-the-Valley creeps along the forest floor, with heart-shaped leaves and spikes of unusual, 4-part flowers. The false Solomon's-seals bloom in late April; the Wild Lily-of-the-Valley takes a few more weeks.

Fairy Lanterns and Fairy Bells



Smith's Fairy Lanterns
Prosartes smithii



Hooker's Fairy Bells
Prosartes hookeri

These are almost shrublike plants that bear hanging flowers beneath the leaves. Hooker's Fairy Bells show the stamens clearly. Smith's Fairy Lanterns have concealed stamens. Both develop orange fruit in the summer. They bloom in forests in mid-April.

Tolmie's Cat's-Ear

Calochortus tolmiei

These charming, fuzzy flowers dot open woods and fields in early May. They are also known as mariposa lilies. 🦋



Events Calendar

Naturalist Adventure

Free, Monthly

Meet at Avery Park Rose Garden, Avery Park in Corvallis
Tracking - Wild Edibles - Native Plants - Birding

Each trip will focus on a seasonal topic of interest. Sometimes we may seek edible plants, find mushrooms, visit a tracking spot or watch birds. Trips will be conducted in a holistic, 'poke-around' fashion. If you want to learn about tracking, these field trips are for you. Children are welcome, but trips are not structured for small children (under 8 years, call or email with questions). Please leave dogs at home. Bring water, binoculars, rain gear, and shoes that can get muddy.

Sundays: 9am – Noon

April 15—Pigeon Butte (see details on right)

May 20—Herbert Open Space (see details on right)

June 17—location to be determined

Pigeon Butte

at Finley National Wildlife Refuge

Sunday, April 15, 9am–Noon

Meet at Avery Park Rose Garden, Avery Park in Corvallis. The trail to Pigeon Butte can be mucky, so bring boots suitable for mud and maybe a walking stick. It's worth it! Birds, lizards and other wildlife abound here. We'll also see some treasured and uncommon native wildflowers. We'll see three species of native violets, an uncommon species of waterleaf, Henderson's Shooting-Star, our very own native "dandelion" and more.

Oak Savanna Wildflowers

Herbert Open Space

Sunday, May 20, 9am–Noon

Meet at Avery Park Rose Garden, Avery Park in Corvallis. Herbert Open space is located south of Corvallis. The area has some oak savanna and native prairie remnants. We'll look for native wildflowers, including some rare species such as Barestem Lomatium, Kincaid's Lupine and Peacock Larkspur. We'll also see Mule's Ears (Wyethia), Red Columbine, Tolmie's Cat's-Ears and others. Forest birds and open country birds find homes here, and we'll try to spot some elusive Western Pond Turtles.

<p>Wild Opium</p>   <p>Naturalist's Calendar</p>	<p>Native Lilies</p>  
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