

FROM LAUREL TO ASTER

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ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS

With

A LONG summer of bloom before us it is not fitting for a lover of the fields to put his large enthusiasms into the mint early in the spring and then spend the small coin of ecstatic phrases on each wayside blossom of a day. He should be prudent, should hoard his store of admiration and then waste it like a spendthrift on some consummate flower, having the perfection of a blossom which is a type of form, the sweetness of one whose only grace is fragrance, the splendor of one whose gemlike color is its sole distinction.

One of these consummate flowers is our Mountain Laurel, *Kalmia Latifolia*. We usually bestow upon it that regard which a prophet in his own country is apt to receive, but in England it is considered as deserving of enthusiasm as any gorgeous blossom of the tropics. When the thin leaves throw their flickering shadows on the austere rocks of a bleak hillside the Laurel mocks their asceticism with a frivolity of pink and white, which froths over the rocks and suns itself in the fortress it has invaded. Even without their remarkable beauty these flowers would yet excite interest because of their structural conditions. The stems supporting the shining, glossy leaves and frail blossoms are covered with a sticky exudation, which, it is supposed, serves a purpose in keeping crawling insects away from the flowers, which are very exclusive, desiring only winged visitors. The five petals of the corolla have ten little pouches, and the tips of the long arching stamens fit snugly into these. When Monsieur le Bee visits a flower his wing or his light feet touch the stamens; immediately they fly upward with a jerk, and little stamen springs force out, from chinks in the top of the anthers, the pollen, which covers the bee with a golden shower. Presently he flies off to another flower, with whose projecting stigma he comes in contact, depositing thereon the pollen which clings to him. Thus cross fertilization is accomplished.

There are a number of curious superstitions connected with the Laurel. One reason of its popularity among the ancients was that they held it a charm against lightning or thunder, which were equally feared. In the Bishop of Chichester's verses on Ben Jonson are these lines:

"I see the wreath (Laurel) which doth the wearer arme,
'Gainst the quick strokes of thunder."



MOUNTAIN LAUREL

And Leigh, in writing of Tiberius Cæsar, says, "He feared thunder exceedingly, and when the air was anything troubled he ever carried a chaplet or wreath of Lawrell about his neck, because that, as Pliny reporteth, is never blasted with lightning." The Laurel referred to, however, is not the same as our Mountain Laurel. Regarding that, there is a belief, still widely extant, that its leaves are extremely poisonous. Darby, in his "Botany of the Southern States," says: "The leaves of the *Kalmia Latifolia* are all poisonous; nevertheless, some animals, it is said, eat them with impunity, and that, too, to such an extent as to make their flesh poisonous to man, it becoming so impregnated with the poison of the leaves." It is even said that the honey the bee extracts from the flower is poisonous, but many botanists, includ-

ing Nuttall, refuse to believe in the injurious qualities of the plant, and merely regard the tough and leathery leaves as extremely indigestible. At the first of June the four-leaved Milkweed, the daintiest member of this large family, opens its delicate white umbels. Its name is most appropriate, as the thin, fine leaves are in whorls of four at intervals up the slender, low stems. This airy blossom may be found nodding on the rocky scraps of dim ravines, or over the bubbling waters of a Fern-hidden pool. It has not heeded that invitation to the road which has led its brothers to marshal their ranks along the highways. Fighting for an inch of ground, these strong-growing weeds raise their great, milky stems, stately, august; and from a lofty summit droop their heavy umbels, not from humility, but from weariness of state. The peculiar flowers are always difficult for a beginner to analyze. The small petals are greatly reflexed, the stamens are on the corolla tube, and adhering to them are five small bodies, each with an incurved horn. These are the nectaries. The stamens arch over the crown these nectaries form, and rest on the pistil, which rises in the centre of the flower. There are always a number of dead flies hanging to the umbels.



MILKWEED

Poor little explorers! In trying to discover a passage to the nectaries their feet become entangled in the pollen, whose masses adhere to a little stem by means of a sticky gum, which pulls out in long threads. I have frequently placed a quantity of Milkweed blossoms in a room opening on a garden, where all insects were free to enter, and after a day's time have examined the plants, to find on every umbel its quota of limp, swinging flies, no other insects; this, however, might have been a mere coincidence.

The Wild Carrot, or Queen Anne's Lace, is the fairest of the *Umbelliferi*. It achieves a remarkable effect in plant architecture—in presenting a front which is at once a marvel of strength and delicacy. The stalks are stout, and the umbels are formed of numerous little green stems, short, but strong withal. And all this framework to support flowers that resemble the light snow blown from over-arching eaves. The Wild Carrots, like the Milkweeds, are gypsy flowers and take blithely to the road, but they are impartial blossoms. Now they pitch their camps by sinuous waterways, now they toss their powdery blossoms by the main-traveled road that runs onward to great, distant cities, as the river flows to the sea, and now again,

"The flowery breast of lacework stirs
Faintly, in the full wind that rocks the outstanding
Firs."

The Leather Flower belongs to the beautiful Clematis family. The bells are of a dull purple, and the vine from which they depend is exquisitely graceful. It is one of those vines whose shoots and leaves are both capable of motion, performing their revolutions in response to that marvelous law, on whose workings Mr. Darwin has thrown so much light.

The Aster and the Goldenrod are friends of such long standing that to mention one without complimenting the other seems a gross neglect. When the Goldenrod spreads the fields with its cloth of gold the Aster then waves its purple banners in the September wind. They both belong to such large families, however, that to enumerate them would require a catalogue. Speaking, then, principally of the Aster, it belongs to the great family of the *Compositæ*, which insist on cross fertiliza-



WILD CARROT

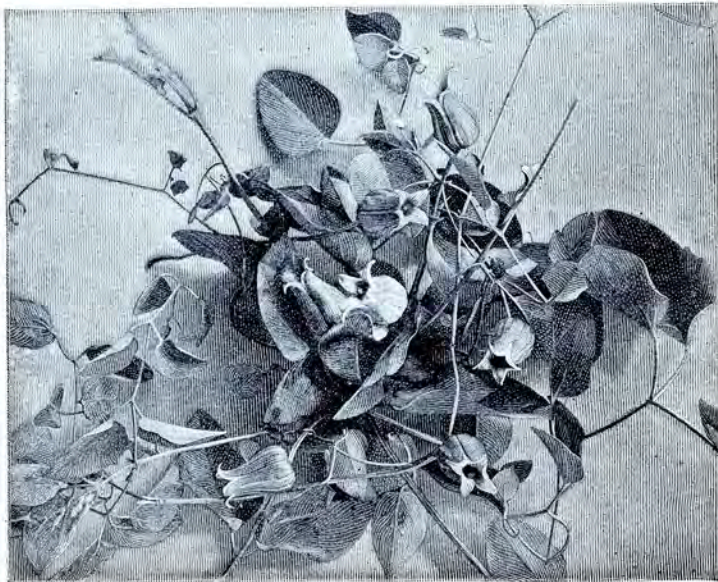
tion, hence their wonderful development; for the composite flowers were once insignificant little blossoms to which no one would give a second glance. In their insignificant stage insects were wont to eat the pollen of the flowers without conferring any benefit in return; but, as Professor Gray has remarked: "Where free lunches are provided, some advantage is usually expected from the treat." It was, of course, impossible for the flowers to prevent this despoliation on the part of the insects, so they gave them something more to their taste than pollen, *i. e.*, honey, and thereafter the pollen was left undisturbed. But the insects were not to have the nectar free; it was so situated that to reach it they must brush against the stamens, thus becoming coated with pollen, which they must carry to another flower.

The insects preferred the bright-colored flowers; consequently, the flowers exhibiting bright hues were more frequently fertilized, and thus the ray-flowers of the *Compositæ* became larger and brighter until they reached their present state of perfection.

The Yarrow gleams white above its lacy green leaves, and the proud purple of the Ironweed enriches the landscape. All during the summer the Mulleins, or Velvet Flowers, as they are called, have flanked the dustiest roadways, always with their cloud of butterflies dancing about them. We never think of bestowing a glance upon them, but in other countries they are grown as rare plants in flower-houses.

Not all the years are long enough to learn the wonders of one wayside weed.

To pull a flower to pieces, analyze and classify it is not to know it. Every flower that grows has some sweet, individual life of its own, and the laws by which flowers live are so marvelous that great scientists have given their lives to the study of them. The tiniest and most insignificant of these blossoms, when magnified, are seen to be exquisitely lovely.



LEATHER FLOWER