

## **The Wildflower Gardens**

Text by Bruce Carley

The first Wildflower Garden, located along the boardwalk near the two farm ponds, features a diverse assortment of plant species native to the forest floor habitats of the northeastern United States and southern Appalachians. This garden originally was created in 1993 by a local volunteer, and other dedicated volunteers have worked to enhance it every year since that time. Many unusual native plant species can be observed flowering in this garden during April and May. A few particularly distinctive species have been marked with convenient labels, and several types of ferns complement the flowering plants with a delicate texture throughout the growing season.

Since 2006, additional plantings of most of the same species have been naturalized extensively along a lengthy stretch beyond the end of the boardwalk, thus creating a naturalistic Wildflower Trail in a serene woodland setting. Here, too, the flowers reach their peak at various times during the spring and mostly fade before the end of May; however, a few species flower or fruit during the summer and so extend, along with the ferns, the visual interest of the gardens into that season. In the fall, a few woodland asters may be seen flowering along the trail.

Most of the plants featured in these gardens were donated by individuals committed to enhancing the area, and some species have been available on a large scale because of the ease with which they can be propagated. Other plants originally were rescued from sites where "development" (so-called) was in the works. As a general rule, if not by law in some cases, native plants should not be dug from their natural habitats unless there is a real need to rescue them from an imminent encounter with a bulldozer. Many native wildflower and fern species nowadays are widely available from reputable suppliers who propagate their own stock, and the increasing use (within

ethical limits) of native plants in private gardens is something to be celebrated and actively encouraged.

In the case of bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) and its relative, the wood poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*), the large colonies which can be observed along the Wildflower Trail were established simply by broadcasting quantities of seed onto moist areas indicated by the presence of such annual and biennial species as jewelweed, clearweed, cleavers, and the non-native celandine. Bloodroot seeds have been available in such volume each year that the species now grows casually in other parts of the Arboretum. Wood poppies are the North American version of those familiar European celandines and are much showier, but no less aggressive. Because of their markedly prolific habit, wood poppies hold much promise for enhancing any woodland garden, but their presence at the Arboretum will need to be managed each year to prevent the species from taking over other garden features or dominating any area.

The red and white trilliums (*Trillium erectum* and *T. grandiflorum*, respectively) constitute major success stories for the Arboretum's naturalistic gardens. These two species are singularly showy and desirable, but they also are relatively slow-growing and inefficient in their propagation. The red trilliums were acquired in several different years from various donors and have proven possible to propagate at a moderate rate, with the result that more than 50 examples can be observed flowering along the trail each spring. The white trilliums with a few exceptions were acquired through a collaborative effort in 2007 involving a fundraiser and add a quintessential beauty to the collection. The trilliums are among the finest treasures of the Arboretum and an inspiration for photographers, but all varieties are easily set back by careless treatment and do not lend themselves to being picked under any circumstances.

These various gems are enhanced by the nearby presence of such species as foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*), Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*), Dutchman's-breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*), wild phlox (*Phlox divaricata*), and numerous others which form a rather lengthy list. While some species prefer acidic soils, the majority benefit greatly from an occasional application of granular limestone to make the soil more

neutral. Other species such as Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*), wood anemone (*Anemone quinquefolia*), wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), and New York fern (*Thelypteris noveboracensis*) occur naturally in this area and are somewhat less colorful, but no less interesting, and they contribute much to the tranquil buffer zones between the trail and other parts of the Arboretum.

The creation and annual maintenance of these gardens has been accomplished largely through the systematic removal of non-native plants in the area. Some exotic species are extremely aggressive and constitute an invasive menace to native plant populations, while others are simply over-used in gardens and have no place here among the natives. Non-native species in both categories have been excluded purposely from these areas to allow the indigenous species to become dominant and to prevent competition by any species which does not belong here. Following the extensive removal of bittersweet, Norway maple, multiflora rose, and the native but insidious poison-ivy, many native plants which had occurred naturally in the area filled in quickly to renew their prominence, and much space was opened for additional plantings of relatively unusual natives.

As a result of these various activities, the naturalistic gardens along the Arboretum's Wildflower Trail provide a demonstration of what is possible with native plants in a wooded area and will remain a source of inspiration for many years to come.