

NATURE DETECTIVES

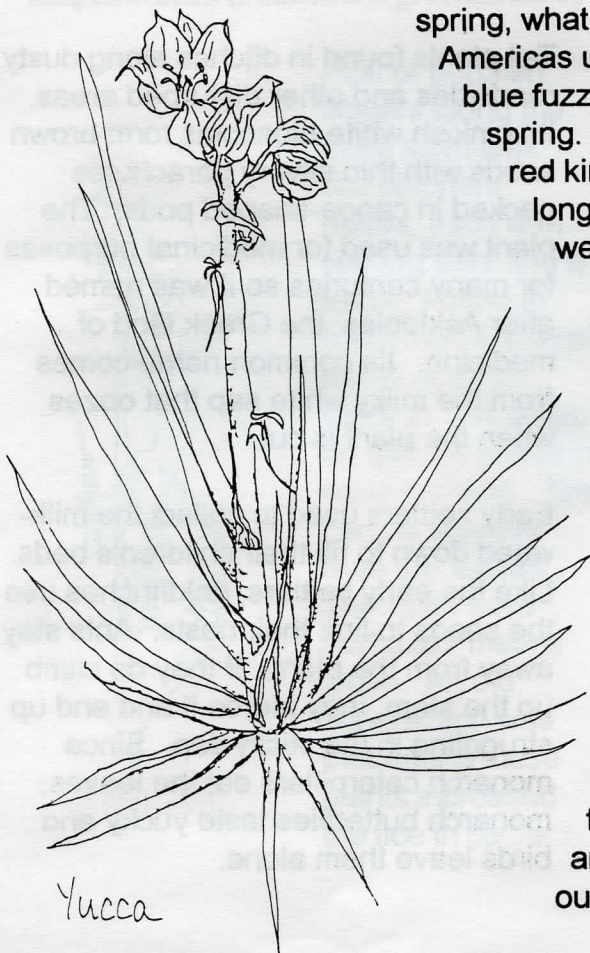
Stalking The Elephanthead

If you were driving down a busy street and saw a red building with gold-colored arches in front, you'd probably recognize it as a MacDonald's restaurant. If you were hiking in the foothills and saw a white, tulip-shaped flower growing in an open aspen grove, would you recognize it as a mariposa lily? Maybe not. Knowing the wild plants around us is not as important as it was when people depended on plants for their food, clothing, tools and medicine. But I still like to know about wild plants, and I'll bet a lot of Nature Detectives do, too. When I know a plant's name, it's like having a friend. I can tell people about it and look it up in books.

I like knowing which flowers are the first to greet me each spring, what berries the bears eat, and which plant Native Americans used to make sandals. Pasque flowers are the blue fuzzy ones that bloom in the foothills so early in spring. Bears love to eat purple-black chokecherries and red kinnikinnik berries. Native Americans used to cut long, leathery yucca leaves into strips and use them to weave sandals.

Each plant actually has 2 names—the common name we use most of the time and the scientific name. The scientific name is in Latin and is made up of 2 parts—genus and species. Scientific names can give us more information about a plant. Kinnikinnik's genus and species are *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*. *Uva-ursi* is Latin for "bear's grape" or "bear's berry" and you've already learned that bears love to eat kinnikinnik berries.

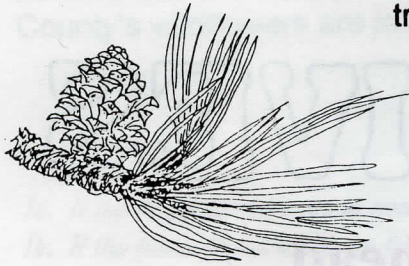
This summer see how many wild plants you can get to know. Draw them. Write down their names and any interesting facts about them. Are they prickly or hairy? Do butterflies and hummingbirds drink their nectar? What animals live in their branches? Wild plants can be our life-long friends.



Yucca

Towering Giants

Ponderosa Pine (*Pinus ponderosa*)



Ponderosa Pine

Massive evergreen tree with long needles in bundles of two or three. Bark is orange-brown and looks like giant puzzle pieces. It also has

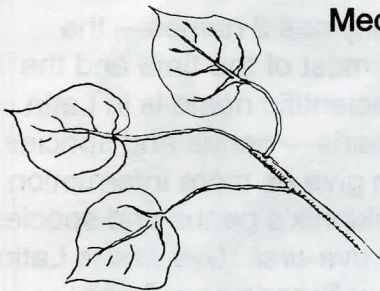
a vanilla or butterscotch scent. Abert's squirrels nest in the tree and eat seeds from cones in summer and the inner bark of small branches in winter.

Nuthatches and brown creepers eat insects that live in the bark. People cut ponderosa pines for lumber. Grows on dry, sunny slopes in foothills and lower mountains.

Ponderosa means heavy.

Hear the Rustling Leaves

Quaking Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*)



Medium-sized deciduous tree. Bright green leaves are rounded with a pointed tip. Smooth bark is white or greenish

with black knots. You can often see the claw marks of bears that climb the tree in spring to eat buds and new leaves or to rob birds' nests. You can also see the teeth marks of elk that eat aspen bark in winter. Grows on moist slopes and along streams from the foothills to treeline. *Tremuloides* means trembling and aspen leaves do tremble or shake in even the slightest breeze. In fall, leaves turn golden.

Showy but Sticky

Milkweed (*Asclepias speciosa*)



Milkweed in bud

Tall plants found in ditches along dusty roadsides and other disturbed areas. Its pinkish white blossoms form brown seeds with thin silvery parachutes packed in canoe-shaped pods. The plant was used for medicinal purposes for many centuries so it was named after Asklepias, the Greek God of medicine. Its common name comes from the milky white sap that oozes when the plant is cut.

Early settlers used to collect the milkweed down to fill their children's beds. Like the early settlers, goldfinches use the seeds to line their nests. Ants stay away from the plant. If they do climb up the stem, they pierce it and end up struggling in the sticky sap. Since monarch caterpillars eat the leaves, monarch butterflies taste yucky and birds leave them alone.



Sewing With a Corkscrew

Needle and Thread Grass (*Stipa comata*)

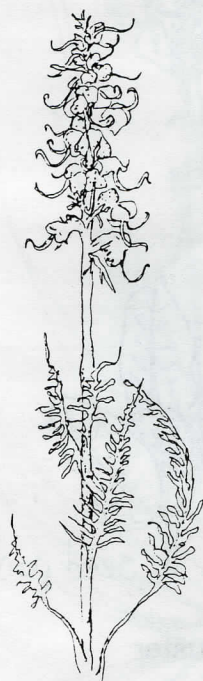


Needle and Thread Grass

Short tufted perennial with long flowering spikes found from the plains to the mountains. The common name comes from the seed which appears to have two parts: the seed itself, which is sharp and pointed like a needle, and the long awn which resembles a thread. When the seed lands on soil, the point helps it pierce the ground. Later, when it rains, the awn curls (try wetting the awn yourself). Like a corkscrew, the curly awn pushes the seed into the ground. Ants harvest the seed for winter use just as a farmer harvests wheat or rice.

Purple Elephants

Elephanthead (*Pedicularis groenlandica*)

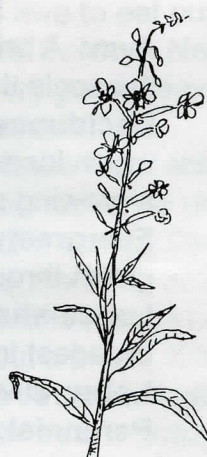


Elephanthead

Pink or purplish flowers along the plant stem look like elephant heads, each with two big ears and a trunk. Found in wet meadows from the foothills to treeline. Elk graze on elephanthead in early summer. Tea can be steeped from the leaves. The Latin word *pediculus* means louse. An old superstition was that eating these plants increased the lice in cattle.

After the Fire Comes...

Fireweed (*Epilobium angustifolium*)



FIREWEED

Elongated clusters of reddish-purple flowers, each the size of a nickel, grow on tall stems. The leaves are narrow and lance-shaped. This plant does not like shade. It grows in open areas after a fire (hence the name) and along disturbed roadsides. The Latin word, *Epilobium*, means "above the pod". Fireweed blossoms open at the bottom of the stem first. So, at times there are unopen buds on top, blossoms in the middle, and seed pods below. *Angustifolium*, meaning "narrow-leaved", describes the leaves of this plant.

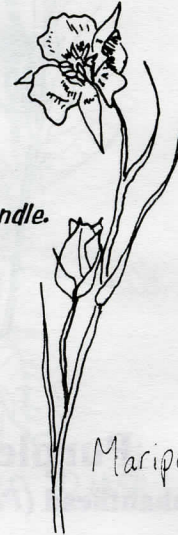


Plant Key

Carpenters need tools in order to do their work. People who study plants, called botanists, need tools as well. One tool they use is a plant key. A key helps you to identify plants and flowers. Here is a simplified version of a wild flower key. Of course, only a few of Boulder County's wildflowers are in it. Try using this key to identify flowers in the foothills.

Wildflower Key

- 1a. If the flower is white, go to number 2.
- 1b. If the flower is not white, go to number 4
- 2a. If the plant is low to the ground and the flowers are wooly, it may be *Pussytoes*
- 2b. If the flowers are not low to the ground, go to number 3.
- 3a. If the plant has 5-petaled flowers growing on a torch-shaped cluster, it may be *Miners Candle*.
- 3b. If the plant has tulip-shaped flowers with 3 petals, it may be *Mariposa Lily*.
- 4a. If the flower is blue, go to number 5.
- 4b. If the flower is not blue, go to number 6.
- 5a. If the flowers are drooping to the ground, it may be *Mountain Bluebell*.
- 5b. If the flowers are tubular and almost purple, it may be *blue Penstemon*.
6. If the color of the flower is orange, it may be *Western Wallflower*.



Mariposa Lily

Dictionary

Awn: A bristle-like tail on the end of the scale that surrounds the seed.

Deciduous: Refers to a plant which loses its leaves at the end of a growing season

Evergreen: A plant that stays green throughout the year

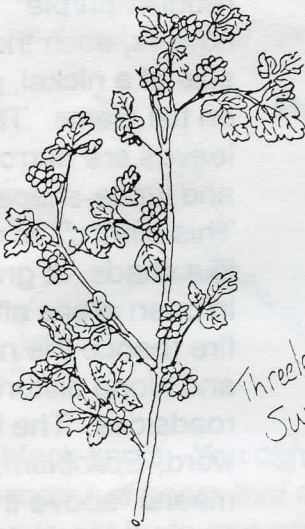
Lance-shaped: Long and narrow, broadest towards the base

Lobe: Division of a leaf

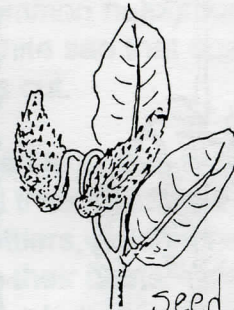
Perennial: Plants which live for several years, even though the parts above ground may die in winter

Pods: A dry fruit that holds seeds

Tufted: Stems or leaves in a very tight cluster



Threeleaf Sumac



seed pods

WARNING

Never eat wild plants unless you are with an adult who is an expert on edible plants.