

Consulting Catharine Parr Traill

*A writer turns to a pioneering
Canadian botanist to get to know
her cottage wild flowers*

BY MARY ALICE DOWNIE

ONE DREARY NOVEMBER DAY 12 YEARS AGO – OR WAS it 13? – my husband and I set off to look at yet another cottage, this one on an island in the Rideau Canal Waterway about 50 kilometres north of Kingston, Ont. We'd been looking for a cottage to buy in a desultory way for several months. We weren't sure exactly what we wanted, although we knew we wanted it to be old and no more than an hour from Kingston, where we lived. The last one we'd seen had been a historic millhouse (1840, with bits dating from 1820). It was charming, but previous renovations had been disastrous, and we noticed that the millstream ran through the basement.

We hadn't held out much hope for this latest possibility when we'd set out in the morning – we'd had too many disappointments. And our spirits weren't lifted when we arrived at the isolated shore where we were to meet our real estate agent – even the weeds shivered. The trees were either leafless or dead.

The cottage, one of six on the island, was overwhelmingly dismal. In the numbing cold we eyed furniture that sagged beneath plastic sheets. Eau de Mothball seemed to pervade everything. It would never do. Still, as the agent had taken the trouble to ferry us across to this Arctic hideaway, it didn't seem polite to ask to leave before we'd at least pretended to explore the property.

We climbed a hill to keep warm – and saw the dark sparkle of the water far below. We had often driven for hours to find a view like this. Time to think again.

We reinspected the cottage to see if we could bear to live in it. Perhaps. We went home, remembered the view, and as soon as our fingers had thawed



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1. White Trillium

Trillium grandiflorum

"In deep ravines, on rocky islets, the bright snow white blossoms of the Trilliums greet the eye and court the hand to pluck them...."

In Nova Scotia they are called Moose-flowers, probably from being abundant in the haunts of Moose-deer. In some of the New England States the Trilliums, white and red, are known as the Death-flower, but of the origin of so ominous a name we have no record. We might imagine it to have originated in the use of the flower to deck the coffin or graves of the dead in the olden times...."

2. Adder's-Tongue

Erythronium americanum

"This elegant yellow lily bends downward when expanded, as if to hide its glories from the full glare of the sun-light. The clouded leaves are of an oily smoothness, resisting the moisture of rain and dew...."

3. Rock Columbine

Aquilegia canadensis

"The wild Columbine is perennial and very easily cultivated.

Its blossoms are eagerly sought out by the bees and humming birds.

On sunny days you may be sure to see the latter hovering over the bright drooping bells, extracting the rich nectar with which they are so bountifully supplied. Those who care for bees, and love humming birds, should plant the graceful red-flowered Columbine in their garden borders.

In its wild state it is often found growing among rocks and surface stones, where it insinuates its roots into the clefts and hollows that are filled with rich vegetable mould; and thus, being often seen adorning the sterile rocks with its bright crown of waving blossoms, it has obtained the name in some places of Rock Columbine."

Catharine Parr Traill
Canadian Wild Flowers, 1868

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enough to use the phone, made an offer. Much to our surprise – and alarm – it was accepted.

WE SPENT THE NEXT FEW MONTHS TRYING TO REMEMBER just what we'd bought, and wondered what it would look like if all the trees were dead from gypsy moth (in those halcyon days we didn't worry about that Genghis Khan of the insect world, the Asian long-horned beetle).

On the first sunny April day, we saddled up the old *African Queen* (this sturdy workhorse of a boat was part of the deal, along with the dejected furniture) and headed for our island. Stepping ashore, we found the slope up to the house a starry carpet of tiny white, pink, mauve and blue flowers.

They looked familiar – what were they? We consulted a favourite source, Catharine Parr Traill. The gifted botanist (1802-1899), less well known to the general public than her peppery sister, Susanna Moodie, came to Canada in 1832 and spent the rest of her long life botanizing, raising a large family, enduring poverty and tragedy, and writing, often under the most difficult of circumstances. *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) is perhaps her most famous work, but it is *Canadian Wild Flowers* (1868), illustrated by Susanna Moodie's daughter, Agnes FitzGibbon, to which I turn most. The exquisite mysterious blossoms on the slope that rises from our island's shore were hepaticas, it told me. As the wildflower calendar unfolded that spring, the book became my floral bible.

I recognize a trillium when I see it, although I grew up in a time when it was considered an endangered species. What an agreeable shock to find hundreds sprinkled through the woods, looking, I imagined, much like those Mrs. Traill saw at Rice Lake near Peterborough, Ont., where she and her family had settled. "Nature," she wrote, "has scattered with no niggardly hand these remarkable flowers over hill and dale, wide shrubby plain and shady forest glen."

We found dogtooth violets (a.k.a. trout lilies and adder's-tongue), which seem to have a death wish, sprawling as they do along the path through the woods. Perhaps they are a relation of parsley and thrive on being trampled.





3



Lady's Slippers

1. *Cypripedium pubescens*

2. *Cypripedium parviflorum*

"The small flowered plant affects a moist soil, such as low wet meadows and open swampy woods; while the larger species, better known by its more familiar name Moccasin flower, loves the open woodlands and drier plains; where, in the month of June, it may be seen beside the gay Painted Cup (*Castilleja coccinea*), the Blue Lupine (*L. perennis*), the larger White Trillium, and other lovely wild flowers."

3. Blue Flag

Iris versicolor

"This beautiful flower, the blue Iris ... abounds all through Canada, and forms one of the ornaments of our low sandy flats, marshy meadows and over-flowed lake shores; it delights in wet muddy soil, and often forms large clumps of verdure in half-dried out ponds and similar localities."

4. Cranberry

Vaccinium oxycoccus

"There is scarcely to be found a lovelier little plant than the common marsh Cranberry. It is of a trailing habit, creeping along the ground, rooting at every joint, and sending up little leafy upright stems, from which spring long slender thready pedicels, each terminated by a delicate peach-blossom tinted flower, nodding on the stalk, so as to throw the narrow pointed petals upward.... The deep crimson smooth oval berries are collected by the squaws and sold at a high price in the fall of the year...."

Catharine Parr Traill
Canadian Wild Flowers, 1868

We had treasure hunts for the graceful wild columbine with its penchant for rocks (we're the people who used to take unwary guests for two-hour crocus walks in Cambridge, England, during my husband's sabbatical there).

There were to be other discoveries on our island – animals, for example. One knows that many eyes are keenly watching from underneath the ferns, behind the rocks and the branches of the trees.

Our island is a paradise, or rather, Valhalla, for visiting cats. After the first day of vigorous hunting they get above themselves, misguidedly decide that they are cougars, and insist on staying outside, carousing with the fireflies. We find them in the morning, quivering, saucer-eyed, on the doorstep. They never say what happened, but after that, they are always present and accounted for at nightfall.

Perhaps they have had an encounter with the rare black rat snake (all two metres of him), which still inhabits the island. There are countless lesser snakes too. I was once standing beside the woodpile, communing with a mother garter snake and her child, trying to overcome my unreasonable aversion to these gentle creatures, when I saw, twined among the logs, a thick white-and-brown shape. I suffered a sudden attack of ophidiphobia and sprinted into the house. A reference book informed me it was the eastern milk snake. The

surly, although nonpoisonous, creature is sometimes confused with a rattler. In fact, it tries to heighten its resemblance to that deadly serpent by vibrating its tail among leaves, imitating the rattler's ominous sound.

Another year, we met this disagreeable reptile heading along the path towards the boathouse with satanic dignity. It glared, coiled, hissed and swished. I keep telling myself the book knew what it was talking about.

We prefer the chipmunks. The mice are charming too, although they do have the habit of stealing bits of clothing, towels or whatever is forgotten in drawers. I picture them boasting at parties: "I have an IKEA rug nest." "Well, mine is made from a Welsh tapestry place mat." Clawproof containers seem to be the answer for winter storage. Or will a modish mouse soon be saying, "How quaint to have a woollen nest. I live in a plastic condo."

The walk across the island to the beaver lodge (or Beaver Mansion, as we tend to call it) is always a pleasant diversion. Most entertaining of all are the racoons, who maintain a watch over the composter. I think they regard it as the local pub. I lift the lid carefully, because one never knows who will be having bar snacks inside.

When we first bought the place, I wondered at the lack of gardens, but I soon realized why former residents hadn't bothered with them. Plant something, and next morning you find the wild neighbours have either eaten it – basil, lettuce and borage are particular favourites – or dug it up to investigate. We have developed a plan of action, my feral consumers' panel and I. I bring a batch of experimental plants to the island and pop them in the ground. By next day, the new greens on the block will have been either digested or rejected. Those that survive, I replant, and later add to, and they're left to grow in peace.

Because of the unique wildflowers, I decided not to introduce "tame" plants, which might become "garden escapees" and take over the island. I only grow edible things beside the back door, where I can keep an eye on them. Fortunately this includes nasturtiums, calendula, bergamot (to provide colour), and I'm also thinking of planting runner beans. Berries I forgo, for as a neighbour said, "It's not a case of *if* the bear comes. It's *when* the bear comes."

There are insects, good and bad. Don't ever make the mistake of looking at a dock spider under a microscope. It is terrifying enough in person. For a while there were carpenter ants, munching in the night, leaving little heaps of sawdust to be swept up every morning from the

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slung between the trees, drowsily
watching a muskrat or kayak*





Water Lilies

Nymphaea odorata

"Pond-Lily is the popular name by which this beautiful aquatic plant is known, nor can we find it in our hearts to reject the name of Lily for this ornament of our lakes. The White *Nymphaea* might indeed be termed 'Queen of the Lakes,' for truly she sits in regal pride upon her watery throne, a very queen among flowers.

Very lovely are the Water Lilies of England, but their fair sisters of the New World excel them in size and fragrance.

Many of the tribe to which these plants belong are natives of the torrid zone, but our White Pond-Lily and the Yellow... are able to support the cold winter of Canada....

Who that has ever floated upon one of our calm inland lakes, on a warm July or August day, but has been tempted, at the risk of upsetting the frail birch-bark canoe or shallow skiff, to put forth a hand to snatch one of those matchless ivory cups that rest in spotless purity upon the tranquil water, just rising and falling with the movement of the stream; or have gazed with wishful and admiring eyes into the still clear water, at the exquisite buds and half unfolded blossoms that are springing upward to the air and sun-light...."

Catharine Parr Traill

Canadian Wild Flowers, 1868

stairs. Not a pleasing sight in a wooden cottage built in the 1880s. And there are mosquitoes, but in compensation there are squadrons of dragonflies, which purposefully zoom after them: big blue ones, like heavy bombers, and, later in summer, smaller green spittfires. Sheer magic is provided by the fireflies dancing among the trees, a New World *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

And then there are the birds: the osprey with its messy nest (I identify with that) perched on top of an old pine or a telephone tower. Every year, a phoebe builds its nest (also untidy – is there a theme here?) on the porch, and we creep about the living room, trying not to disturb it. Turkey vultures, the raptor only a mother could love, soar through the sky.

Best of all is the blue heron, often poised in profile like a wall painting, which gives it a distinctly Egyptian look as it stands motionless among the water lilies. How suitable, for as Mrs. Traill said of the water lily in her book: "The Lotus of Egypt belongs to this family, and ... furnishes magnificent ornaments with which to crown the heads of their gods and kings."

But it's not all nature study on the island. There have been many memorable human events: a post-wedding party, where people canoed, hiked, swam and napped, and a recent weekend gathering with 10 adults and six small children (there was a family in every room). And now we often hear the howls of young babies competing with the song of the wolves (really coyotes) and the maniacal cackle of the loons.

Despite the fact that the cottage has been ours for more than a decade, much work remains to be done. We should repaint the woodwork and fix the roof, but – the indolence of islands – time drifts by and we say, "Maybe next year."

Most afternoons are spent in the Yucatan hammock slung between the trees, drowsily watching a muskrat or kayak paddle by. The kayaker is 90 years old, which perhaps explains the vessel's tranquil pace. Strung between two smaller trees, there's a *hamaca por el niño* – guaranteed to lull the most intransigent baby into deep sleep.

It's possible to read in the hammock – at least for a short time before dozing off – but you can't write in one. Still, many a manuscript has been composed in it (this one included) before being transferred to paper (or disc) at the dining room table on summer mornings. How agreeable to sit looking through the window at the current cat heading purposefully down the path to the shore. I resist the temptation to go down myself to count the closed gentians or to see how an artistic neighbour is progressing with her watercolour of the boathouse. The blue *chimenea* (Mexican oven) lurks among the poison ivy. A woodpecker rat-tat-tats in the distance.

Most recently, I've been revising *Scared Sarah*, a story for children set in the days of Catharine Parr Traill. She remains a good companion and an invaluable source. And these days, thanks to an old cottage on the Rideau, I know considerably more about life in the backwoods of Canada. □