



Educating The Heart Of An Artist - Flora

I am an avid gardener. I have never met a plant that I could resist. Even dandelions have a place in my world. When I was just a sprout, my Mom and I would trudge out to the vegetable garden and tenderly water, weed and care for the tomatoes, radishes, onions, et al. I learned to appreciate the hard work of canning produce in the hottest season of the year. We had basement shelves lined with glittering quart jars of pears, applesauce, pickles, green beans and corn. Potato storage in a cold corner kept the tubers fresh all winter. In late summer Mom and I went out to the pasture lands and found where the wild raspberries grew. A special treat was a heaping bowl of fresh raspberries smothered with real cream and dusted with sugar (The rest of the days "pickings" were canned for the long cold days ahead). We picked wild "highland" blueberries and sweet aromatic wild strawberries. The hours spent with Mom were as an outdoor classroom. I also learned the names of all the trees, shrubs, grasses and weeds.

But OH! The flowers! The farm had apple trees with their distinctive delicate fragrance and the deep heavy smell of the lilac bush was eagerly anticipated each Spring. Mom's roses entwined themselves around my memory. I was taught to find the wildflowers of each



season and which ones could be picked and which ones left alone. The flowering arbutus was endangered so you enjoyed its fragrance and passed it by. In spring we sought out the three types of violets, accompanied by an old melody that told of their location and growing habit. There were May Flowers (I later learned the botanical name, Hepatica) to pick and put in hand-

woven baskets to hang on the doorknob of the neighbor's house on the first day of May. Mom would drive me to town with a small bouquet of May Flowers to present to the editor of the newspaper. He would then announce in his column that Spring was officially here! When the first dandelions popped up, I was allowed to go barefooted only when I brought Mom a handful. In my small hand that would be five or six, although Mom always insisted on ten! She would lovingly place them in a small fruit jar on the kitchen shelf above the stove, where she would look up at them and smile (Do you think she knew it was really still a little too cold to go outside barefooted in Wisconsin in May?). In summer the fields would glow with white daisies punctuated by the orangey-red fire of (what we called) devil's paintbrushes. Goldenrods bent their heavy laden heads and bowed graciously to passers-by. Milkweed would puff out its soft feathers of pure white and with a gentle breeze, pillows of summer snow danced off toward the distant clouds. I learned to find the red clover blossoms, and pluck out the individual "petals" to taste the sweet nectar at the base of each one. I wove chains of white clover to wear as a princess' crown. My Mom never planted annual flowers in her garden. Why would she? God provided the beautiful bounty all around her. Deep in the woods were the tall graceful foxgloves and wild columbines, In the meadows by the streams were brilliant yellow buttercups. In the pastures beneath spreading trees were found spring beauties and bloodroot, jack-in-the-pulpit, and several kinds of trilliums.



My education did not stop at the edge of the vegetable gardens and wildflowers. I came to know the names

and habits of all the trees on the hillsides. I loved the wild sumac with its fuzzy branches. I learned the difference between hemlock and pine. I could identify the sugar maple and elm, the chokecherry and wild plum. I knew which trees were good to climb in, and which would break under my weight. I adored the cool leaves of the deciduous trees in the summer and gloried at the vivid fall colors. However, I think my favorite time of all was when the winter came. There is something about the intricate tracing of bare branches against a winter blue sky, when the earth is blanketed with snow, and the crisp air magnifies the sound of the lightest touch of an animal's paw, that delights the artist's soul of me. Always has, always will. I remember awakening to see a world draped in silvery white frost that totally surrounded every single twig, of every single tree. The sparkle was more enchanting than a king's ransom of diamonds.

Moving from Wisconsin to (eventually) Washington State, found me no longer a country girl. Now I was a suburbanite with a patch of lawn and next-door-neighbors. I had a yard of my own. Well, it wasn't long before the lawn began to disappear and a row of raspberries sprang up, and a patch of carrots, lettuce, and cabbage moved in next to it. Soon room was made for asparagus, and rhubarb, then blueberry bushes. In a small plot, I filled the space with the latest hybrid of everbearing strawberries. In the alley behind me grew wild blackberries, full of seeds, but great for pies. I was delighted to discover that draped over the neighbor's wooden fence grew a tangle of tangy sweetness, blackcap raspberries, spilling over into my yard (She was quite willing to share the bounty with me and my family). My backyard had two apple trees. Girlhood memories stirred again with the apple blossoms in Spring. Along the back fence a grove of plum trees promised good eating come fall. And so I canned. The homegrown harvest was supplemented by the produce of Eastern Washington fruits. Soon the walls of my pantry were lined with the glow of glass enclosed gold and green, red and brown. I made pies and put them in the freezer, to be relished on a drippy, grey Washington winter day.

I taught myself to recognize the trees of the Northwest. The stately evergreen Douglas fir adorned hillsides and roadways, yards and farmlands. I learned to recognize the native cedar, coastal spruce, and shore pine. Madrona trees weaved their vivid reddish-brown limbs in and around them. Beneath the spreading branches of the towering giants, wherever there was a glimmer of sunlight, the indigenous purple rhododendron flourished. In clearings left after the harvest of logs, vine maples sprang up to flash the

autumn days with a brilliant red bandana. In the forest behind my home grew the big-leaved maples, elegant and dignified with a heady



crown of summer glory. Winter saw their lacey patterns of black branches against a lowering grey sky. Alders graced the wetlands, and in Spring the aromatic scent of cottonwoods wafted across the land. One enchanted evening, the winter chill turned falling rain to ice. Everything, everywhere became coated in a silver glove. In the glow of the street lights, a world of unbelievable beauty emerged. Car lights glittered on the tiniest of twigs, roadways and driveways shone in rippled patterns like magical mirrors. True, the devastation to the trees was tremendous that night, but my artist's soul observed and clung only to the loveliness of the scene. The Northwest was the new home for my heart.

And OH! The flowers! Walking along quiet rural roads, I spied fields of delicate Queen Anne's Lace waving "hello" to the sky and clouds (I resolved then and there to grow them in my yard someday). Bachelor



Buttons held hands with Ox-eyed Daisies in meadows between blankets of green. Golden California Poppies popped up in ditches to taunt the harried traveler to stop and take a closer look. I discovered the Pearly Everlasting that carries bouquets of cottony white balls at the tops of slender stalks. In summer,

delicate sky-blue Chicory enhances the gravelly edges of hot, impersonal concrete city streets. There are also some familiar faces. The Trillium graces the woodlands; there are Columbines and Bleeding Heart native to the area. Huckleberry and Honeysuckle decorate the edges of the forests, with Solomon's Seal and Penstemon spreading their delights to diligent

observers. Many of these flowers have found their way into my gardens (I learned the hard way to contain those with prolific growing habits within the confines of pots). Some of them have been generously donated by birds passing overhead! When a new home was built behind us, I rescued starts of Trilliums from the woods, and naturalized them in my yard. They seem to have appreciated the effort, for they have rewarded me with myriads of blooms, year after year. I treasure the dainty Johnny-jump-ups as though they were pricey purchases from the nearest nursery. The wild woodland Columbines seem to be more disease resistant and the color more intense than the store-bought kind. These local beauties make a colorful counterpoint to the hybrid flowers that I regularly plant in my beds. Tame or wild, I love them all.

Now I have the challenge to pass the knowledge on to my grandchildren. Megan, at three is already interested in creating her own garden. Zach, five, waters the dandelion that somehow managed to survive in the gravel next to my driveway. Molly, now nine, is curious about the flowers and their names, and Aaron, well, he's just a baby yet, but not too young to "pick" a



blossom to show Gramma. And, yes, the early botanical training I received from my mom, and the subsequent self-education has stood me in good stead as an artist. Flowers appear in my watercolor paintings. Their essence is hinted at in my pastel landscapes. The oceanside plants occasionally are an essential component in the oil paintings of

lighthouses, kites or shoreline. Clients appreciate the credible accuracy of the flora as I am able to render it. The feeling I have for God's color spots comes through when I paint. I know that plant outside and in! May I present it to you, for you to enjoy as a painting or print in your city or country, home or office?