

Wildflowers of Lewis and Clark

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The earliest wildflowers of the season are in bloom in many places. The tiny signs of spring are the introduction to a wide variety of lovely flowers that we can enjoy for the next several months.

Two hundred years ago when Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery traveled across Montana on their way to the Pacific Ocean they encountered a great variety of native plants that were largely unknown in the eastern part of the country. During this expedition they collected over 200 plant specimens, 175 of those original specimens exist today. In Montana we are fortunate to have many of those plants growing in the wild for us to enjoy. Many of the plants or their relatives may even be growing in our yards and gardens. Shrubs like Potentilla (shrubby cinquefoil), Serviceberry, Chokecherry, Currant, Silverberry, Mock Orange and Winterberry may be part of a landscape plan that provides berries for birds.

Wildflowers like Lewis' Blue Flax grow along the roadsides or expressways, their bright blue flowers blowing in the wind. Many other wildflowers, or their hybridized relatives are cultivated as perennials – Gaillardia (Blanket Flower), Lupine, Liatris (Blazing Star) and Purple coneflower. These popular flowers grow well in the local area because they are largely native plants.



Linum lewisii © 2001 Larry Blakely

Hikers have the opportunity to see some of the smaller and more site specific plants that Lewis and Clark collected as they walk through different habitats. The Fairy Slipper, a type of orchid, grows in rich, moist humus in the woods, frequently under evergreens where the fungi necessary for its growth is present. Lewis' Monkey Flower grows along streambeds where there is lots of moisture. Bitterroot, our state flower, needs very gravelly well drained soil. Red Mountain Heather grows only in alpine conditions.



If hiking isn't part of your lifestyle there is a much easier way to see some of the plants collected by Lewis and Clark. All you need to do is pay a visit to the Museum of The Rockies in the summer. At the Museum several volunteers, who are members of the Gallatin Empire Garden Club or the Gallatin Gardener's Club have been working with the museum to establish two gardens that feature native wildflowers and the plants of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Rocky Mountain Iris – *Iris missouriensis*



CLARKIA – *Clarkia pulchella*

At the Tinsley House Living History Farm there is a native wildflower garden, which includes two plants identified by Lewis and Clark that you are not likely to see in the wild in the Gallatin Valley. They are Clarkia or Elk Horn named in honor of William Clark and Snow-on-the Mountain, a type of euphorbia. Both of these plants are self-seeding annuals. The Clarkia is a lovely pink flower that grows up to 10 inches tall, while Snow-on-the-Mountain is a showy white and green plant that grows up to 2 feet tall. Other native wildflowers in this garden include Blue Flax, Rocky Mountain Iris, Gaillardia, Penstemon, Yellow Stonecrop, Jacob's Ladder, Columbia Tickseed and many more. This garden has been growing for 2 years and continues to expand.



SNOW- ON-THE MOUNTAIN *Euphorbia marginata*



Arrow-leaved Balsamroot –
Balsamorhiza sagitata

At the Lewis and Clark Challenge Course in front of the Museum of the Rockies is the Lewis and Clark garden, which was established last year. Here you will find shrubs like Serviceberry, Silverberry Currant, Buffaloberry, Chokecherry and Sumac. The flowers include Arrow Leaf Balsamroot, Pussy Toes, Coreopsis, Columbine, Yarrow and many of the others that are in the Tinsley garden.

Both of these gardens are free with museum admission. Additionally there are garden tours given daily at the Tinsley House Garden from July 1 to Labor day.

Many people enjoy having a wildflower garden in their yard. We are fortunate to have a number of nurseries in our area that have wildflower plants and seeds for sale. It is important to remember that trying to transplant wildflowers from the wild is NOT permitted. Typically they will not survive a transplant anyway. Many have very long taproots and others need certain types of soil fungus or host plants to enable them to survive. Just enjoy them in their natural habitat, take a photo and look for plants and seeds from which to start your own garden. There are many excellent books on wildflowers available at local bookstores so enjoy all our wonderful native plants!

Susan Andrews was the 2003-05 Wildflower Chairperson of the Montana Federation of Garden Clubs and President of the Gallatin Empire Garden Club in Bozeman.