

Wild Flowers of Lewis and Clark

by Susan Andrews, Gallatin Empire Garden Club

ARROW-LEAVED BALSAMROOT – *Balsamorhiza sagitata*

Arrow-Leaved Balsamroot is a perennial herb, a member of the Aster family (asteraceae). It is also called, Bigroot, Big Sunflower, and Spring Sunflower.

It was named for the sap in its large woody root. The sap smells like balsam fir pitch.

This plant grows in dry soils, grasslands, sage areas and open hillsides and blooms from June to August.



The plant grows 8 – 16 inches in height with large yellow ray flowers that are 2 – 4 inches across. The large leaves can be up to 12 inches long and 6 inches wide and are shaped like an arrowhead.

This plant was an important source of food for native peoples. In spring the large leaves were boiled and eaten. The seeds were dried or roasted and pounded into flour. The roots were applied as a remedy for wounds. The leaves, roots and stems were made into a tea and drunk for pains in the stomach and colds.

Meriwether Lewis collected a specimen of this plant on April 14, 1806 near White Salmon, Washington. A second specimen was collected on July 7, 1806 near Lewis and Clark Pass in Montana.

BEARGRASS - *Xerophyllum tenax*

Beargrass is a member of the Lily Family (Liliaceae). It is a perennial herb that grows in mountain forests and open areas from British Columbia to California and east to Montana and Wyoming.

It blooms from May to August depending on the altitude. These plants do not usually bloom every year. The showy flowers are cream colored and grow in dense racemes on a tall stem from woody rhizomes. The evergreen, basal leaves grow in clumps. They are 1 - 2 1/2 feet long, grasslike and very tough.

Beargrass is difficult to grow and does not do well in gardens so it is best to enjoy them in their native habitat. Other names for Beargrass are Squaw Grass, Elk Grass, Turkey Beard, Bear Lily, Pine Lily and Indian Basket grass. Sometimes the latin name is spelled Zerophyllum.

The flowers and seeds are eaten by rodents, elk and big horn sheep. Mountain Goats may eat the tough leaves in winter. Bears eat the fleshy leaf sheaths in the spring. Native tribes ate the roots either roasted or boiled.



Lewis collected a specimen of this plant on June 15, 1806 on the Lolo Trail in present day Idaho. He also noted in his journal on January 17, 1806 at Fort Clatsop that the Clatsop Indians used Beargrass to make baskets.

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CLARKIA – *Clarkia pulchella*

Clarkia is a self-seeding annual herb, a member of the evening primrose family Onagraceae. It was named for William Clark by botanist Frederick Pursh. It is also called Elk Horn, Ragged Robin, Deer Horn or Pink Fairies. It is sometimes confused with fireweed since it has similar coloring.

Clarkia is found in dry sites and disturbed sites, often with sagebrush at lower elevations. It is one of two native species of Clarkia found in the western United States and as far east as western Montana.

The leaves are narrow, alternate and linear. The flower is usually pink but white ones are also found. The petals have 3 deep lobes and resemble antlers -- thus the name deer horn or elk horn. The plants grow 6-12 inches high and flower for 6 weeks in the summer.



The plant was observed/collected near the Clearwater River in Idaho, near present day Kamiah on June 1, 1806. No seeds were collected as they were not ripe at the time of the discovery.

MOCK ORANGE – *Philadelphus lewisii*



Mock Orange is a member of the Hydrangea family (Hydrangeaceae). It is also known as Syringa.

This deciduous shrub grows along streams and on rocky cliffs and slopes. It grows from 4 to 8 feet tall. The leaves can be lance shaped or oval. They grow opposite and have three main veins.

The white blossoms have four petals and many yellow stamens. There are usually 3 to 11 flowers on each branch. The fragrance of the blooms is similar to orange blossoms. This shrub blooms from May to August, depending on conditions.

The wood from this shrub has been used to make combs, knitting needles and rims for birch bark baskets.

Lewis and Clark collected specimens of this plant on May 6, 1806 along the Clearwater River in Idaho and on July 4, 1806 on Grant Creek, near Missoula, Montana. The original specimen of this plant collected by Lewis and Clark will be on display this summer at the Crazy Mountain Museum in Big Timber, Montana

ROCKY MOUNTAIN IRIS – *Iris missouriensis*

This is the only iris native to the Rocky Mountain Region. It has also been called: Western Blue Flag; Fleur-de-lis; snake lily and water flag. It grows in moist meadows and stream beds that are dry by midsummer. These flowers are found in isolated patches from the eastern slopes of the Cascades to the Dakotas and south to New Mexico.

Rocky Mountain Iris blooms from Mid-May to July. This perennial flower is pale to deep blue with purple veins. It blooms atop a stalk that is 8 – 24 inches tall with basal sword shaped leaves. It grows from spreading rhizomes.



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The rhizomes are poisonous. Historically, small amounts were used to induce vomiting. The seeds when eaten cause burning of the mouth and throat for several hours.

Native Americans used the pounded roots along with other ingredients to make an arrow poison which killed the victim within several days.

Meriwether Lewis collected a specimen of this plant on July 5, 1806 while passing through a high prairie, which he called the Knobs. This is near present day Ovando, Montana

ROCKY MOUNTAIN BEE PLANT – *Cleome serrulata*



Rocky Mountain Bee Plant is a member of the Caper family (Capparidaceae). It is also called Spider Flower, Pink Cleome, Stinkweed and Stinking Clover.

This annual herb grows from 1 to 5 feet tall and blooms from June to August. It prefers dry open sites, often in disturbed ground from the plains to the mountains.

The compound leaves are alternate and divided into groups of 3. They are oval to lance shaped. The flowers are pale pink to reddish purple. Each flower has 4 petals and 4 sepals the showy pink filaments are twice the length of the petals. The flowers are arranged in racemes at the end of the stem. The plant has a distinctive and unappealing smell. The flavor of the plant is

pungent, like mustard.

Meriwether Lewis collected the first specimen on August 25, 1804 in the open prairies of South Dakota .

The Plains Indians used Bee Plant for food, medicine and in ceremonies. They boiled the leaves and flowers and ate them. Some tribes pounded the seeds into flour to make bread.

SNOW- ON-THE MOUNTAIN *Euphorbia marginata*

Snow on the mountain is an annual herb, a member of the spurge family (*Euphorbiaceae*). It grows in dry soil and is found in the grasslands of the Great Plains from Minnesota to Montana and South to Texas and New Mexico. It blooms from June to October.

This plant grows up to 3 feet tall and has a milky juice. There are fine hairs on the stems. The lower leaves are large and solid green, growing opposite and alternate. The leaves are pointed but round near the base. The upper leaves are smaller and have white margins. The flowers consist of numerous small 5 petaled blooms that are clustered together.



Meriwether Lewis collected this plant as specimen # 26 August 4th near Blair, Nebraska. This specimen was lost but William Clark collected the one that still exists on July 28, 1806 on the Yellowstone River in Rosebud County, Montana.