

Woodland Wildflower Gardens



Photo by Donna Legare: The yellow flowers of senecio and woodland phlox with its purple flowers in springtime, beneath the old live oak.

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February 10, 2011 Release
Tallahassee Democrat

A person passing by our yard in the next few weeks will probably notice bright red tulips and pretty pansies, but they may miss seeing our more subtle winter wildflowers. One would have to walk beneath the large live oak tree to experience the wonderland of woodland wildflowers that are just beginning their annual show.

First up are the mottled green leaves and deep maroon flowers of trillium and the dainty white flowers of bloodroot. Wild violets are blooming at the same time, as are the bright yellow trout lilies. Soon to follow are the interesting green hooded flowers of Jack-in-the-pulpit. Woodland phlox is just beginning to bloom; by March its purple masses will be very showy. About the same time, the red and yellow bells of wild columbine will appear over taller fern-like foliage, attracting the first of the ruby-throated hummingbirds to return this spring.

Later wild white indigo or Baptisia will shoot up, displaying large clusters of white flowers, so showy that passersby usually stop and say, “oohh”. By May, Indian pink is in full bloom beneath the old live oak, its red tubular blossoms very attractive to hummingbirds.

If you decide to create a woodland wildflower garden in your yard, select a shady spot that has rich, but well-drained soil. Most spring wildflowers become dormant in warm weather and may disappear altogether over summer and fall. You may want to define your garden by placing a statue, limestone rock or resurrection fern-covered log as a backdrop. Do not mulch the garden except with the leaves that naturally fall there. This will enable the wildflowers to spread by seed over time.

Also include a few evergreen wildflowers and perhaps a fern or two. Senecio is an evergreen groundcover that sends up spikes of yellow blossoms in early spring. Wild ginger has evergreen leaves that smell like licorice when broken. Look closely to observe its “little brown jug” shaped flowers that sit on the forest floor. The bright spring green of maidenhair fern lends a nice contrast to the wildflowers, as do the dark green taller fronds of leatherwood fern and shorter Christmas fern.

Each year I give one or two of these special woodland wildflowers to my friend B O’Toole of O’Toole’s Herb Farm for her January birthday. Over time, she has developed a lovely woodland garden that she calls her “Faerie Garden”. It is less showy but more subtle and magical than her large herb garden. Magical, because she forgets about the wildflowers while they are dormant; they surprise her every winter and spring when they reappear like old steadfast friends.

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