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Cichorium intybus

By Barbara Nuffer

Sky blue flowers of wild chicory beautifully decorate the shoulders of New York's rural and urban roads. A European native, this perennial herb was first cultivated in North America in the 1700s. Although each individual flower lasts only one day, the plant is continually in bloom from May through October. Common names include "cornflower" and "coffee weed."

Blooming early in the morning, the flowers turn to follow the sun.

The silver-dollar-sized flowers are scattered in clusters along the three- to four-foot tall stems of the plant. Rarely, white or pink flowers may be found. Like dandelion, chicory has a composite flower, meaning the single "flower" is actually made up of many flowers. Each blue petal, with its distinctive toothed edge, is actually a ray flower, containing both male and female parts.

Blooming early in the morning, the flowers turn to follow the sun. The Swedish botanist Linnaeus used the flowers as a "floral clock," finding that they opened at 5 a.m. and closed at 10 a.m. in that latitude.

An early Greek legend has it that a beautiful blue-eyed maiden refused the

amorous pursuit of the Sun God Apollo. To avenge his rejection, Apollo turned the maiden into a blue flower that opens each morning to face the sun and slowly fades throughout the day.

Europeans prize young chicory leaves for salads. Egyptians have eaten them for thousands of years and still do. The French dig up the deep tap root and force white shoots during the winter

for a salad called Barbe de Capuchin or "Beard of the Monk." The root has been roasted and ground as a coffee substitute since the Napoleonic Era in France, although it contains no caffeine. You can find chicory coffee today in New Orleans cafes being sipped along with a fresh sugary beignet. It can also be used as a flavoring for brewing stout.

The medicinal qualities of all the parts of the chicory plant have been known for centuries. It has been used for everything from an aphrodisiac to a cure for constipation. Nicholas Culpeper, the famous seventeenth-century herbalist, described it as "good for those who have an evil disposition." The plant has

other uses as well; surprisingly, the blue flowers produce a yellow dye and the green leaves produce a blue dye.

Thomas Jefferson grew chicory on his Monticello farm. Chicory's leafy growth has a higher nutritional value than alfalfa, is particularly grazed by pregnant beef cows, and is an excellent livestock forage supplement due to its toxicity to parasitic worms. And the 3,000 seeds that

the average chicory plant produces are a prized food for birds.

Queen Anne's Lace, with its delicate, doily-like white flowers, frequently grows intertwined with chicory, creating a lovely blue and white fringe along New York's summer roadsides. Look for brightly plumaged goldfinches flitting among chicory plants gathering seeds, flashing yellow around the true blue flowers. It is a sight that will make you smile.

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