



Fall 2004

Five Rivers Environmental Education Center

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Also Known As: Wildflower Aliases and Their Origins

Some people eat hoagies. Others prefer heroes or grinders. I like subs. Although most long-sandwich consumers would agree that hoagies, heroes, grinders and subs are essentially the same heavenly creation, people also tend to exhibit a strong preference for the name that's local to their hometown.

Plants are a lot like these sandwiches: they often suffer from an identity disorder due to their excessive collection of nicknames. People have been naming plants for hundreds of years. They name them after their fathers, or, if they're vain, after themselves. They name them for their function in the human world, their (supposed) ability to ward off the devil, or for their (supposed) aphrodisiac qualities.

Some names, like "sub" and "green umbrella" are pretty obvious. A long sandwich looks like a submarine, just as a mayapple exhibits definite qualities of a small, lime-colored parasol fit for a toad. Names such as "Our Lady's flannel" or

"liveman" are more difficult to ponder, but their origins are often fascinating. Let us delve into the realm of plant nicknames, lest we find ourselves deeply contemplating the origin of "chicory" while sitting in traffic on the Northway.

Sweethearts

As a child of the twentieth century, I attempted to predict my love life by means of a soda can. Legend has it that if you flip the top of a can back and forth and assign each flip a consecutive letter of the alphabet, the letter you end on when the top breaks will be the first initial of your spouse-to-be.

Oddly enough, teenagers in the south of England long ago were equally obsessed with whom their future love would be. Instead of soda cans, however, they used tiny parts of the bedstraw plant. A sprig of the plant would be thrown onto a girl's back. If it went unnoticed, it meant that she had a sweetheart.

*New York State
Department of Environmental Conservation
George E. Pataki, Governor
Erin M. Crotty, Commissioner*

If, however, she suspected and pulled it off, or if it fell to the ground, the bent stem would form the initial of her future lover. Thus the romantic association formed bedstraw's alias.

The plant's most common name comes from its convenient use as a mattress filler. It creeps along the ground and bears tiny flowers and hairy stems. These stems cling to passers-by, and so the plant is also called grip-grass, cling-rascal and stickywilly.

I tried walking through a patch of the plant, but it didn't really feel that sticky. It tripped me a lot though, for it forms a dense mat like a net over the ground. I also tried the sweethearts' game. A co-worker threw a small stem at my shirt, but it just seemed to bounce right off me every time. So much for my love life. At least with a soda can you're guaranteed a partner.

Wegewarte

Anyone who's near a road in July has seen this flower. It is scraggly and aimless, yet possesses blue flowers that inspire a feeling of innocence, much like a four-year old child scampering on the lawn. *Wegewarte* is the German name for chicory. It means "watcher of the road."

There is a romantic story behind this name, which starts out with a maiden waiting for her lover to return from a long voyage. She went out every morning to the road (where she bade him farewell) to watch for his return. Every evening she would return, broken-hearted because the lover never showed. She did this every day until, wracked with grief, she sat down and died. In her place, *wegewarte* grew, and opened and closed its flowers every morning and evening to honor her.

Chicory was believed by many to have the ability to magically open boxes and doors. Who needs keys when you have chicory? As long as you cut the flowers with a golden knife at the stroke of midnight, and without emitting so much as a breath, they will open any lock.

The (less magical) meaning of the word chicory actually stems from the Latin word *succure*, "to run under." This refers to the roots of the plant, which make a good coffee substitute for those who aren't addicted to caffeine. Chicory is also called coffeeweed, blue sailors, ragged sailors and blue dandelion.

Hag's Taper

This is a plant you cannot ignore; it crops up on roadsides and empty lots across New York State. Unnoticed, fuzzy leaves sprout over poor, gravelly soil the first year, only to erupt into an impressive, cactus-like structure the next. In its glory, mullein, or hag's taper, can grow to six feet tall, with yellow blooms covering its spire. This plant had no chance of escaping story-tellers.

The name mullein is an improvement on the old French word *moll*, which means soft. The leaves of mullein are indeed soft, and that's fine. But why name a plant moll when you could name it hag's taper?

There are two theories on how the name hag's taper came to be. The first, and less interesting, is that hag is a variation of the old English word *haege*, meaning hedge. Mullein often grows along the edges of woods and disturbed areas, so this is a likely derivation. The more exciting version, however, is that the stalk of the plant was dipped in fat and lit on fire to serve as a torch, in order to ward off hags, or witches.

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Five Rivers Environmental Education Center Fall Program Schedule 2004

Programs are free of charge unless otherwise noted. Participants should dress for the weather! We regret that we cannot accommodate organized youth groups at these programs. Please call to make special arrangements for a group.

We welcome those who have any type of physical challenge to all of our programs. If you call ahead to let us know your needs, we will be happy to learn how we can best serve you.

For further information or for pre-registration, call Five Rivers at (518) 475-0291. In the event of severe weather, programs may be canceled. Please call the Center to confirm.

Saturday, September 4 FALL FLORA 2:00 p.m.

An introduction to some of Five Rivers' common trees and flowers. Wild fruits provide an important food source for wildlife, and are the first touch of fall colors. Join us on a walk to look at some common wildlife food plants.

THE EARLY BIRDER

Walks are held on Thursday mornings: **September 9, 23, 30 and October 7.**

The early birder gets the bagels! They also get some great birding in Five Rivers' woods, fields and wetlands. This spring, birders will get some great coffee, too. We serve **shade-grown organic coffee** at our bird walks. This coffee is grown in a manner that preserves the rainforest canopy that is such an important habitat for so many migratory birds. It is "fairly traded," organically grown, and on top of all that, it tastes great!

**Join us at 7:00 a.m. for refreshments and feeder birds.
The outdoor walk begins at 7:30 a.m.**

Beginners are always welcome!

Bring binoculars and bird identification guides if you have them—we have some to lend.

Saturday, September 11 MONITORING MONARCHS 2:00 p.m.

Though the mystery of Monarch migratory routes may have been solved, the wonderment of it all still astounds. Join us for a field foray in search of Monarch butterflies and caterpillars as we study the seasonal habits of this most unusual species.

Saturday, October 30 HALLOWEEN OPEN HOUSE 2:00-4:00 p.m.

Are you in search of an alternative to Halloween activities that are too violent or too scary? Come to our traditional Halloween Open House, where naturalists will be on hand to share information about bats, bones, and spiders galore. Touch a coyote skull, run your fingers over bear's teeth, and learn about snakes and toads. There will be games, surprises and refreshments. Groups are welcome, but must call to pre-register by October 28. All activities are ongoing; come in costume if you wish.

Friday, November 5 AUTUMN NIGHT WALK 7:00 p.m.

What could be better on a cold November night than a brisk walk? We'll explore the darkness, look for constellations, and listen for night sounds. To experience Five Rivers by night, join us after hours for this flashlight-less ramble. Dress warmly and come prepared to explore the night!

Saturday, November 6 *Watchable Wildlife: DEER* 2:00 p.m.

Early November is an excellent time to go "scouting" deer. Deer are very active at this season, fattening up for the winter and chasing prospective mates. Tracks, trails, pellets, rubs, scrapes, beds and mast are all indicators of the season's prospects. Join us for a field study of the natural history of deer and learn what's what.

Wednesday, October 13 HUNTERS' SEMINARS 7:00-9:30 p.m.

Hunters can hone their outdoor skills at this evening of presentations on safety afield, prospects for local DMUs, and a special presentation by Deer Search, Inc. Attendees *must* have a '04-'05 hunting license. Please call the Center to pre-register by Monday, October 11. This program is free of charge.

Saturday, November 13 PROJECT WET WORKSHOP 10:00-3:00 p.m.

This workshop will introduce "Project WET" (**W**ater **E**ducation for **T**eachers). Participants will receive a manual of activities suitable for teaching about water science, aquatic wildlife and environmental issues. Pre-register by November 11. Dress for the outdoors. Teacher in-service credit can be coordinated by arrangement with the Greater Capital Region Teacher Center.

Wednesday, November 17 FRIENDS OF FIVE RIVERS ANNUAL MEETING 7:00 p.m.

The Friends of Five Rivers cordially invites members and friends to its annual membership meeting. This year's program will feature a presentation by Open Space Institute Executive Director Joe Martens. Mr. Martens has been instrumental in recent land protection initiatives at Five Rivers and will share his keen insights into open space protection. A business meeting reviewing The Friends of Five Rivers' accomplishments and projects of the past year will precede the program, which is free of charge.

Saturday, December 4 BIG PINE WALK 2:00 p.m.

No idea where the Big Pine Trail is? Not many people know about this beautiful trail, it's one of Five Rivers' best-kept secrets. The Big Pine winds along the Vlomankill Stream, under the shade of some majestic white pines. Join us for a hike on this trail, and check it out for future use when you cross-country ski.

Friday, December 10 DARK NIGHT WALK 7:00 p.m.

Moonlight can make a night walk as bright as day, but there'll be no moon tonight. Experience the mystery of the "dark of the moon," but as our eyes get used to the darkness we'll be able to test our night vision and find our way around the trails without using artificial light.

Saturday, December 18 HOLIDAY DECORATION— IT'S NATURAL 2:00 p.m.

You're invited to join us for a crafty afternoon of holiday decorating. A variety of materials and instructors will be available. Please call the Center at (518) 475-0291 to pre-register by December 16. There is a materials fee of \$5.00/family for Friends of Five Rivers members; \$10.00/family for non-members.

Tuesday, December 28 N.A.R.P. FOR THE HOLIDAYS 10:00 a.m.

N.A.R.P. stands for Naturalists as Reading Partners. Join us for a cozy indoor reading of a winter nature story, geared to grades pre-k through 4. Then bundle up as we go outside to search for animal tracks and traces in the snow, then we'll finish up with hot chocolate and popcorn as we watch birds at the feeders. Please call to pre-register by December 26. There is a fee of \$1.00 per person.

Thursday, December 30 N.A.R.P. FOR THE HOLIDAYS 10:00 a.m.

N.A.R.P. stands for Naturalists as Reading Partners. Join us for a cozy indoor reading of a winter nature story, geared to grades pre-k through 4. Then bundle up as we go outside to search for animal tracks and traces in the snow, then we'll finish up with hot chocolate and popcorn as we watch birds at the feeders. Please call to pre-register by December 28. There is a fee of \$1.00 per person.

Friday, January 1 ANNUAL NEW YEAR'S DAY BIRD COUNT 9:00 a.m.

Come help us ring out our old annual bird list and ring in the new, as we search high and low for our fine feathered friends. In the twenty years of this annual foray, over 62 different species have been recorded. Bring binoculars if you have them; we have some to lend. Dress warmly!

Staff: Nancy Payne, Anita Sanchez, Dee Strnisa, Craig E. Thompson, Lori Whiting, Christina Doherty (SCA) and Lauren Pidot (SCA)

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Mullein has a long list of names associated with it, including Aaron's rod, Peter's rod and Jacob's staff (we don't know whose it is for sure), Our Lady's flannel (for the soft leaves), beggar's flannel, fluffweed and hare's beard.

The leaves were used in shoes for extra support and circulation. I tried this and it hurts. The leaves were also used by female Quakers, who rubbed them on their cheeks for appearance purposes. Thus, the plant earned the name Quakers' rouge as well. This also hurts, but, boy, are my cheeks rosy. Maybe I should try this plant's most important power: love divination.

To use mullein in this sense, you must first name it after your lover. Then, bend the plant towards your home. If it keeps pointing in the same direction over time, it means your lover is true to you. If it changes direction, so has your love.

Judging from the sweethearts' game, I'm guessing I'm not going to have that much luck with mullein. I will stick to soda cans for love advice and submarines in the deli, but as far as wildflowers go, wegewarte is the new chicory.

Alli Corbett
Student Conservation Association Intern

Director's Notebook

Doing More With More

At this writing, we are on a pace to surpass last year's record-breaking 118,000 public contacts. Much of this year's success is directly attributable to a cadre of exceptional new staff. The rest is attributable to a cadre of exceptional regular staff.

This year's Student Conservation Association (SCA) staffers Lauren Pidot, Alli Corbett and Christina Doherty have been doing outstanding work! For example, they developed a fabulous unit titled "Wetlands in the Classroom" that they have been taking all around the Capital District.

We are proud to report that Alli has taken a permanent job at Saratoga Spa State Park. Lauren will complete her tour of duty in late September and Christina in late October. We are deeply grateful to the SCA for again providing us the opportunity to work with and get to know such remarkable people!

In June, Yusuf Burgess joined our staff specifically to spearhead diversity initiatives within the tri-city area. As a result of Yusuf's hard work, we have been able to bring our conservation programs to many under-served groups throughout the region, and, vice versa, to also bring many such groups to Five Rivers for programs.

Thanks to these go-getters, we have reached new heights in program quality and quantity.

Craig E. Thompson

Fall Gardens

Fall is the season when the Wildlife Garden is at its peak. Come and visit this beautiful garden, which is maintained by volunteer wildlife gardeners. In order to encourage songbirds, hummingbirds, and butterflies, the garden is completely organic; no chemical pesticides or fertilizers are used.

Be sure and check out the developing Water Garden, located on Nature's Accessible Backyard Trail, near the gazebo.

If you would like to get involved, the gardeners meet the fourth Wednesday of every month at 6:00 p.m. during the growing season to weed, prune, and plant.

Think Before You Spray!

If you choose to use insect repellent during a visit to Five Rivers, do so responsibly. Know what it is that you're putting on your skin! Read all the fine print on the container. Do not put repellent on hands or face—in fact some repellents should not be put on skin at all!

Children are especially susceptible to the harmful effects of repellents and pesticides. Consider using organic substitutes. Please do not handle any wildlife, especially frogs or salamanders; if you have insect repellent on your hands, it could kill them.