

*Critic's Choice Essay***SEEKING A SPECIAL PLANT**Reprinted from *Gaillardia*, Spring 1998

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I am nearing a bottomland forest, one filling the large band of a Bird Creek meander north of Tulsa. It is a typical, beautiful Oklahoma winter day. Typical in that it is overcast, the wind is from the north, a hint of moisture is in the air, and temperatures near freezing. Beautiful in the sense that no others will be out today.

The editor asked for a botany article, one featuring an interesting Oklahoma plant. I quickly accepted since the literature search is always rewarding. I enjoy discussing our native flora, and it is necessary to go into the field to gather information. Past articles have featured goldenrod, mistletoe, pokeweed, and other species. The present problem is, what species should I write about? One approach is to go into the field and wander until, by chance, the plant makes itself known.

Leaving the truck at the edge of the road, I enter the forest and immediately encounter a large lagoon, too deep to wade, and besides, it is too cold to get wet. That means a walk, which turns out to be worthwhile. Along the bank, the surface is a mat of water fern, gathered here by the persistent wind. The few openings are covered by duckweed from which several birds, startled by my intrusion, gather wing and flee to what they must perceive is a safer place. I wonder what lurks beneath the surface? There must be a multitude of insect

larvae, many active while others have started the pupation process, a prelude to the reawakening of aquatic life next spring. The lagoon is interesting, but I must move on, seeking that special plant.

The forest consists of large oaks, hickories, ash, elms, and maples. There is no sound but the wind pushing against the protesting trees, the soft impact of late-falling leaves striking the litter-covered soil, and complaints of crows objecting to my presence. The tranquil beauty compels me to stop. I settle comfortably on a fallen tree and become immersed in thought – there is something special here. Nearby I spot a tangle of vines consisting of Oklahoma's three members of the moonseed family: Carolina snailseed, moonseed, and cupseed. The striking yellowish-orange buds of poison ivy catch my eye, and close examination reveals bud scales covered with long, soft hairs. Suddenly a white-footed deer mouse, unable to stand it any longer, darts from temporary hiding near my feet for the security of its burrow a short distance away. But it is time to press on in my search of a subject for this article.

Why follow this worn path when an animal trail angles off in the direction I wish to go? The trail shows evidence of deer passing recently. The prints indicate an adult and two juveniles, perhaps a doe with her twins. In this moist area, the trail is lined

with broadleaf spanglegrass, the heavy fruiting stems forming arches. Youngsters prefer to call the grass “fish on a line”, a most descriptive name. Many of the plants here are still green; perhaps this spot has escaped a hard freeze. Beyond the wet area, I find myself surrounded by coralberry (Kansans call it buckbrush), still bearing dense clusters of the reddish fruit which give it our common name. This would be a good subject for the article, but I prefer continuing; it is difficult to give up the interactions with nature and the peaceful seclusion.

In spite of the low temperature, something is moving in the leaf litter. They are wolf spiders scurrying about, although most are under the protective leaf cover. Interestingly, none of the females are carrying egg sacs, the eggs having long since hatched and new young dispersed. These spiders live five or six years and are active through the winter. I wonder how they survive the bitter cold?

In the distance, a fallen tree has a distinct reddish glow which calls for examination. It turns out to be a beautiful mass of brightly pigmented moss sporophytes – but this is not the time for moss reproduction. Down on the belly! An up-close, hand-lens look and it is obvious each capsule is wide open, empty of spores. A delightful winter gift from Mother Nature. As I arise, I am greeted by a raucous, almost vulgar alarm cry from a Great Blue Heron as it struggles to get airborne along the edge of the creek. I move to the bank to watch the heron disappear

around a bend and find the slope covered with hop vines. Most have been frozen, but some are still green and show evidence of browsing, probably deer. While examining the hop fruits, a skunk appears, moving rapidly in my direction. It stops at the sound of my voice, stares directly at me, and seems to listen as I explain I am no threat and sincerely hope it shares my peaceful intent. After appearing to consider my comments, it continues, not toward me but at an angle, passing without so much as a “Pardon Me” and disappears into the dense mass of hop.

Space will not permit me to share all I found. There is so much more: the beautiful sulfur-yellow winter buds of bitternut hickory, logs covered with carpets of small tan puffballs, a Great Horned Owl passing soundlessly overhead, patches of leaves covered with powdery mildew, huge sycamores and cottonwoods, and spots of bright green in the leaf litter which turn out to be henbit, nettle, and groundsel – a sneak preview of what is to come.

Later, as I contemplate bur-oak fruit along the trail and marvel at the few acorns but abundance of empty fringed cups, it occurs to me it is getting darker; the sun must be setting. At the edge of the forest, I climb onto a dike, this time into a much stronger wind, heavier clouds, stinging rain, and it is colder – but still, that beautiful Oklahoma winter day.

No, I have not located that special plant I was seeking. That is bad; what will I tell the editor? On the other hand, it is good; I must return to this spiritual place and continue my search.

*ONPS*