Early Summer Wild Flowers

When do we pass from spring to summer? By the calendar on June 21 but flower-wise it is a couple weeks earlier. The largest numbers of plants begin flowering from mid-May all through June. Prairies show greatest abundance the last of June if moisture is sufficient. Woodlands are more colorful in late May before the leaves make a heavy shade.

Some plants that are represented by several species run through several weeks. One cinquefoil belongs to spring, others are more common into summer. Prairie cinquefoil, usually low and spreading with gray leaves, is widely distributed. Tall cinquefoil belongs also to the prairie but the coarse stem is erect, the flowers more nearly white. Rough cinquefoil is a common weed in low places or in neglected fields. Its leaves resemble those of strawberry.

The handsome little blue beardtongues of the western hills and the stocky white one of the east belong to spring. The slender purple one is widely distributed in lower prairie. The large beardtongue, with two-inch flowers, and rounded waxy leaves, is found in sandy soils in Richland County and the Mississippi River valley, blooming in June.

Some of the best displays of color in late June or early July are in low grassland, usually on sandy soils. The wild red lily is sometimes abundant (it should not be pulled in quantity), along with yellowish-white camas and purple bluebells. If the soil is clay, hawkweed, a dandelion relative with slender stems, is often common. Bluebells will be found also on the hillsides.

On the prairie along road banks or on hillsides, prairie thistle, blue lettuce and purple coneflower are conspicuous after July 1. Silverleaf, in gray patches a foot high, is common. The flowers are a nice blue but too small to see at a distance.

The large, purple-flowered milkweeds bloom also in July. The common one grows in low ground through eastern North Dakota and the showy milkweed with larger flowers and fewer in a head all over the state, especially in wet saline soils.

Wild flaxes are often abundant, the stiff yellow flowered on prairie, often dry or sandy; the willowy, perennial blue one more often on north slopes. As in field flax, the flowers usually fall by noon.

Milk-vetches are numerous in species and vary in habit. One of the most common species has a thick clump of short stems and heads of blue-purple flowers. One, found usually on gravel slopes, has thick clumps of slender stems, white flowers and flat pods. One, called little rattle pod from the thick clusters of pods, has very stout stems two or three feet high and yellowish flowers. The ground plum, with fleshy red and green fruits, is one of the earlier flowering. The plants form a mat, one to three feet wide.

Three of the most showy milk-vetches are found mainly in the western part of the state and are poisonous to livestock from their habit of absorbing large quantities of selenium. The two-grooved (pods) is most widely distributed and has large spikes of red-purple flowers. One with pale yellow flowers and sharply three-cornered pods is quite local on clay banks. The third, called "comb-leaved", is restricted to the extreme west. Its yellowish flowered plants sometimes form showy bunches in June. The pods are small and rounded.

Prairie-clovers, with clusters of slender stems and thimble-like flower clusters, grow on prairie, hillsides or disturbed banks. The purple one has a pungent odor when bruised (lacking in the white). There is also a gray, hairy species with pale violet flowers which grows abundantly in sand dunes. Leadplant (from the gray leaves) is a small shrubby plant, growing mostly in sandy prairie. The orange-colored stamens are showy as they protrude from the purple flower spikes.
Milk-vetches, prairie-clovers, leadplant and silverleaf are all legumes. Another plant of sandy soil is often mistaken for a legume because it has leaves of three leaflets and long pods. It is called bee plant or stinking clover, it is a large annual with long clusters of pink flowers and drooping pods.

Red mallow is a showy plant along roadsides in early July. It seems to prefer clay soil and where the bank has been bladed lightly it often grows vigorously. White milkwort, a low, tufted plant with thick flower spikes, grows on hill tops or where gravel is abundant. Alumroot is conspicuous because of its large rounded leaves. The flowers are small at the top of a long stem.

Evening-primroses are represented by several quite different species but are recognized by the four petals. Butte primrose ("gumbo lily"), a small plant with large white flowers, grows on the sides of bare clay buttes or on clay flats. White-stemmed evening-primrose is a tall, white-flowered species that spreads by the roots in sandy soils.

There is a similar annual plant in western North Dakota that lacks the white bark. The common evening-primrose is a coarse, weedy plant with yellow flowers. The tooth-leaved is a slender prairie plant with yellow flowers open in daytime.

For western North Dakota, butte primrose and the three poisonous milk-vetches occur. Two species of lupine, known by having five or seven leaflets from a central leafstalk, are found. The small lupine, a brittle annual with bicolored (blue and white) flowers, sometimes makes patches on sandbars or washes. Silvery lupine is a showy, bushy plant with blue flowers on the southwestern prairie. Blister beetles often destroy most of the flowers. Mariposa lily is sometimes common on prairie slopes. Yucca is usually not common but is showy on the rough hillsides. Prickly pear cactus is often common and very showy when in bloom. A smaller species is more widely distributed. It usually grows on clay flats and rarely blooms.