

Making Ripples

Wildflower Whimsy

by Amanda Bancroft

I consider myself a budding botanist, pun intended. This isn't so much because I fancy the flowers, but because I love pretty much everything else – from hummingbirds to mountains. Acknowledging and respecting the role wildflowers play in our native ecosystems is a part of being a good steward and naturalist. For some, though, developing an interest in boring, tiny flowers might require more than an awareness of the support they provide to pollinators and an admiration for their beauty. What has captivated me the most is their *names*.

Common names for wildflowers bring up images of dog's teeth, blazing fires, pussy's toes, hens and chicks, and enough characters and imagery to put together a nice children's story. Besides that, they're just fun to say, providing us with opportunities to make humorous attempts at the pronunciation of "hoary puccoon."

Some names get lost in translation. Forget-me-nots are called Ear-of-mouse, or Myosotis in their original Greek name. Folklore from 15th-century Germany tells of a knight who picked flowers for his lady, but fell into the river from the weight of his armor. As he was drowning, he tossed his lady the flowers and shouted "forget me not." It was often worn as a symbol of undying love.

Some flowers have names that could read like the title of a novel, such as Kiss Me Over The Garden Gate. Others are named after simple foods but have a complex folklore associated with them, for example, Butter and Eggs, also called Bacon and Eggs, Brideweed, Dragon Bushes, Devil's Ribbon, Peddler's Basket, and Yellow Toadflax (since toads may shelter among its branches). Ernest Thompson Seton, a naturalist, created a story telling of a little yellow dragon which died when a fried egg became stuck in its throat. The dragon was then transformed into the Butter and Eggs flower.

Pussy's Toes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*) are popular with children and cat lovers alike, because they resemble little kitten paws. Downy Phlox (*Phlox pilosa*) comes from Greek, meaning 'flame' with color variations from light pink to purple, with flowers blooming until mid July. Yellow Dog's Tooth Violet (*Erythronium rostratum*) was named by the shape of its bulb, but some people name it after another species entirely, calling it a Yellow Trout Lily because of its mottled leaves. There are at least 24 species of buttercups in the Ozarks, among them the Crow's Foot Buttercup (*Ranunculus spp.*) named because of the shape of the leaves and its shiny, waxy yellow blossoms.

Variations in Ozark wildflowers are fairly common, due to mutations, cross-pollination and other factors. If you happen to find a flower known as *Whathea heckisthisa* and can't identify it with any guide books, be sure to give it a memorable, whimsical name that your family will recall for generations as your secret code word to begin giggling!

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