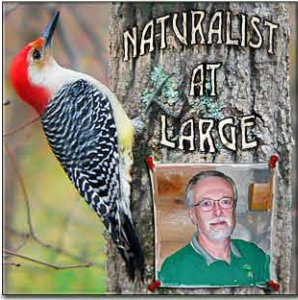




NATURALIST AT LARGE



Dan Farmer is a long-time Michigan Naturalist with a wide ranging interest in nature, heritage, and outdoor topics. He is currently the Naturalist for Shelby Township Michigan at Burgess-Shadbush Nature Center, in River Bends Park. He has served as naturalist at several nature centers in southeastern Michigan, taught graduate classes at Wayne State University, and done program presentations and consulting throughout the region. Dan specializes in plant and animal identification with a particular interest in insects and spiders.

BY: *Dan Farmer*

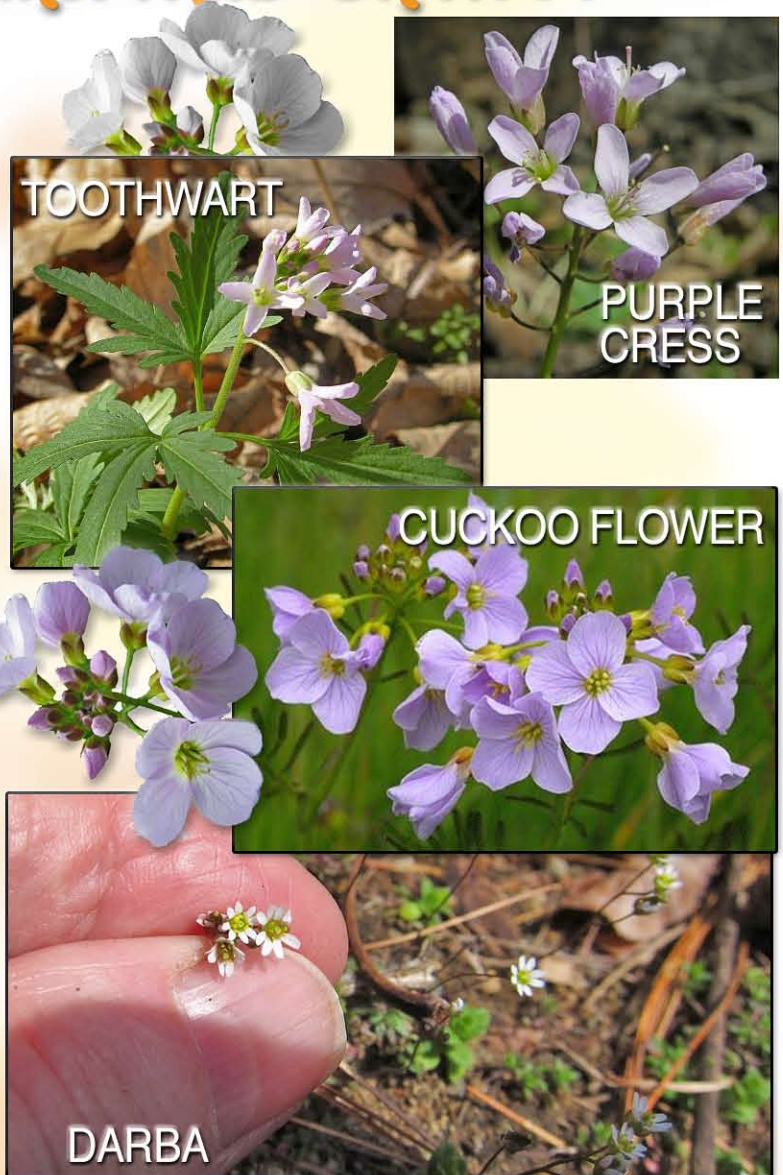
NATURALIST at the
BURGESS-SHADBUSH Center

PUT A LITTLE MUSTARD ON IT...

Baseball season is upon us and every fan knows that the term “put a little mustard on it” applies to the sport in at least two ways: first the condiment we apply to hotdogs which are practically synonymous with baseball; and secondly the something extra a pitcher adds to the speed of a pitch or a fielder adds to a throw. The first “mustard” definitely relates to plants as it is a mustard plant which provides the seeds that we grind and then add vinegar, water, salt, turmeric, onion powder, spices, and natural flavoring, that makes the tangy condiment. But probably few folks realize that when they hike or even walk outside they are likely pretty close to a mustard plant. You see, Michigan has about 90 kinds of mustard growing wild!

Mustards, as a family, are pretty easy to identify. First count the petals. There are typically 4 petals (and 4 sepals) that make up each flower. If you pull back the petals you will see the central “pistol” and 6 surrounding stamens. Four of the stamens are longer and two, opposite each other, are shorter. See, it is pretty easy to identify a mustard – at least to the family level, but you will need an 8 to 12 power magnifier, hand lens, or jeweler’s loupe.

People who botanize or look closely at the details of any nature topic need to keep one with them always and use it often. Springtime is a marvelous time for wildflowers. Some come and go in a few days so one is motivated to hike often to see what is new and what is still in bloom. Cuckoo Flower, Purple Cress, Spring Cress, and the Toothworts are among the spring mustard flower parade. But it is one of the most inconspicuous mustards that can lay another claim to fame. Draba is a small genus of rather unimpressive flowers that often grow in disturbed or “waste” places. Aldo Leopold in his seminal work on conservation, *A Sand County Almanac*, sings the praises of Draba.





This little mustard puts out its flowers during those cold, damp days that only hint of spring. These are the days when winter usually dies by the inch and every hint of spring gladdens the heart of those who love nature. Everyone interested in the natural world would do well to read the works of Leopold. Many consider his ideas to be among the best ever recorded.

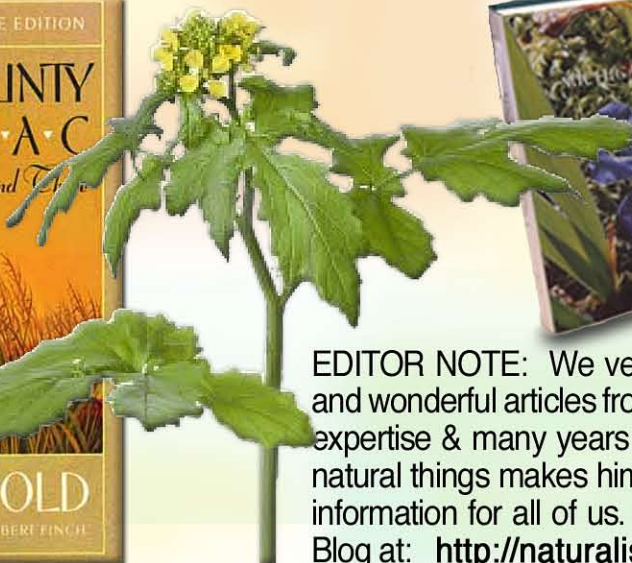
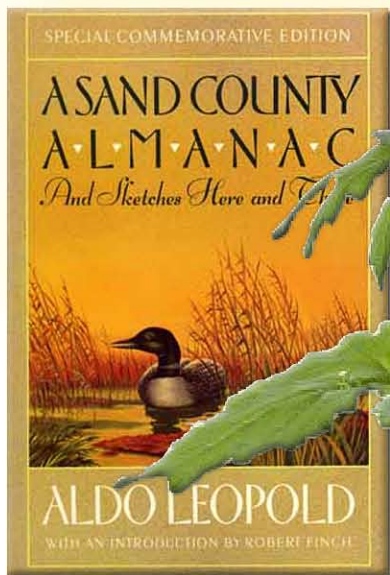
Look for members of the mustard family where ever you are – between a lawn and the road, on and near piles of dirt, fallow crop fields, and the like. If you are interested in learning about some of the species in the mustard family Brassicaceae (or Cruciferae) you can certainly try Newcomb’s Wildflower Guide, but if you are serious you will need Vol. II of Michigan Flora by Dr. Ed Voss. For some species you will need the plant (preferably in flower) and the ripe or nearly ripe fruit, and good luck. This is a challenge few will take up but like everything else worthwhile a bit of investment in time and effort now, pays off in knowledge and appreciation in the field.

Look closely, and don’t miss the details.....Dan Farmer

Michigan offers about 2,500 wildflowers and they will become yours when you get to know them. I have taught 4th graders and beyond how to use Newcomb’s. Read the introduction. Use a 10 power hand lens, magnifier, or loupe to look at details. ALWAYS START WITH PLANTS YOU ALREADY KNOW OR SOMEONE ELSE KNOWS. This will help familiarize you about how this guide works. And this book really works. I have given a one hour introduction to a group of 4th-6th graders who then used the book to identify more than ten wildflowers that were completely new to them.

Why learn about wild plants? Besides the fact they are interesting on their own they will provide information about other kinds of wildlife that may be found in an area. Almost every butterfly has a specific plant or group of plants that it relies on for food when in the caterpillar stage. Sometimes exact plant identification is required especially if it involves using wild plants for food or other practical purposes. It is also a must in identifying potentially harmful plants. Learning individual plants in no way takes away from the overall effect they provide.

Somewhere along the line, when you have learned about many plants, those that you don’t recognize will stand out more than they do now. They will beckon to you to identify them. And at some point in time you may hike to search for new plants. That is called “botanizing”. It can be a milestone in your life. It means you have arrived at special place. Now you may see plants as simply a mixture of leaf shapes, textures, and colors but eventually they will become individual species. When you find a new plant, be sure to take notes in the margins of your field guide. I list the date, county, state, and specific property along with a note on the person or people I am with. Later these notes, along with the plants you discover and the time you spent discovering and working on them, may be priceless to you.



MICHIGAN FLORA
Dr. Ed Voss Vol.1-2-3

EDITOR NOTE: We very appreciate the informative and wonderful articles from naturalist, Dan Farmer. His expertise & many years of experience in and around natural things makes him a treasure trove of valuable information for all of us. Read more from Dan on his Blog at: <http://naturalistatlarge.wordpress.com/>

