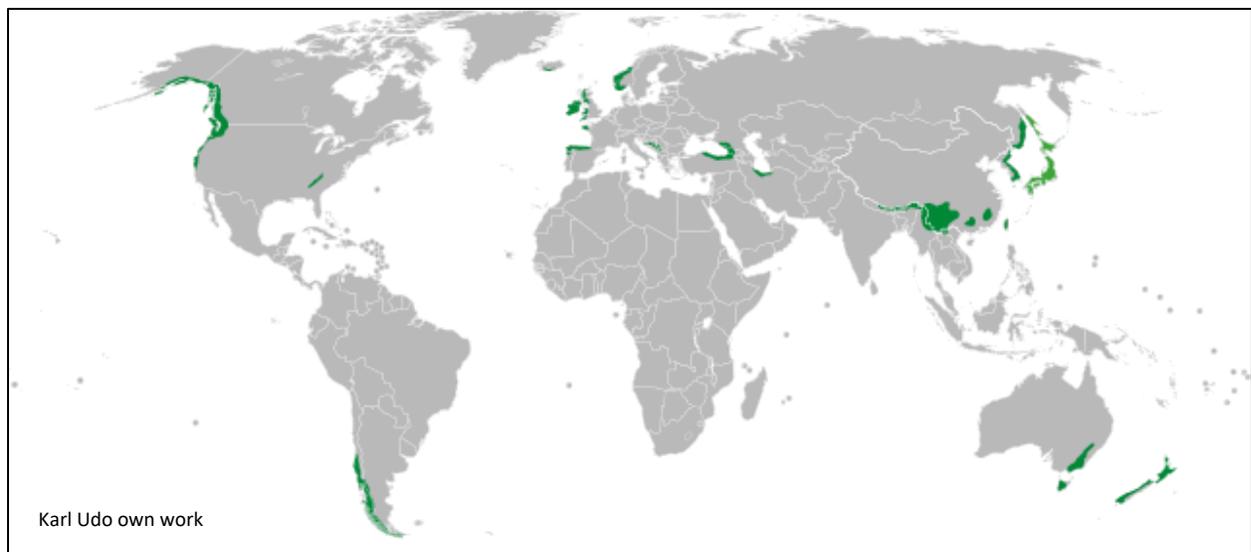


Wild Flowers at VZ Top (update of 4 Jun 2022 by Dan O’Neill, 706 VZ Top Rd)

As I have walked around the top of this mountain we live on, I have noted as the wildflowers come and go. I have consulted a few books I have, and the internet, in an attempt to identify some of the species. Here are my notes. Comments welcome.

First, it is worth noting that the land around our mountain top is what the Nature Center calls a **Temperate Rain Forest** (as opposed to a Tropical Rain Forest), and in particular of the acidic type common to what are called Montane Forests. One description is: “Montane forests are found in mountainous areas and may contain plants such as **oaks, rhododendrons, and pines**, which are characteristic of temperate deciduous forests.”

Temperate rain forests are actually pretty rare, and we just happen to be in one, as this map shows:



Part of why we qualify is that we get about 80 inches of rain per year. Due to the ‘orographic lift’ effect, when the air masses pass through our area, the mountains cause the air to lift, which cools it (‘adiabatically’) and this causes condensation (like the ‘dew’ on a cold glass of water), so we get rain.

This is somewhat related to the fact that we are actually located exactly atop the Eastern Continental Divide. Rain that falls on the North and West side of our mountain flows north and west along the Cullasaja River, then the Tennessee River, then the Ohio, then the Mississippi, and ultimately flows past New Orleans and into the Gulf of Mexico. Rain that falls on the other side flows south and east to the Chattooga River, then the Tugaloo River, then the Savannah River, and into the Atlantic Ocean at Savannah.

Another description of our area might be oak-heath forests, characterized by well-drained (because of the slope), acidic (low pH) soil. Think: lots of oak canopy above thick rhododendron bushes. That’s us.

One caveat as you read this: Not all of these flowers bloom at the same time. Some bloom in April-May, and others bloom in July-August. Look for new blooms as you walk around throughout the season.

Rhododendrons and Mountain Laurel

Of course, because we are in a montane forest area, the most prominent flowers we see each year are the rhododendrons and mountain laurel. There is some confusion about which is which (not to botanists, but among locals). As the authors of *Great Smoky Mountain Wildflowers* (a great resource) say about the mountain laurel: “Early settlers knew laurel as ivy, and rhododendron as laurel”. They also say that the easy way to remember which is which is: “Short leaf, short name; long leaf, long name”. The rhododendron has large flowers and long leaves. Colors are mostly dark pink to light pink and even some white. Mountain Laurel flowers are smaller, pinkish white.



Rhododendron



Mountain Laurel

Dogwood

This beautiful small tree has creamy white flowers, sometimes with a shade of green. What we think of as its flower is actually its bracts. In autumn it is distinctive for its bright red berries and red foliage. It blooms in early spring, and reminds some of Jesus’s crucifixion, with the spiky flowers in the center being like a crown of thorns and the colored notches on the bracts being like the nail wounds in his hands and feet. We have planted many of them. There is a pink version as well.



Creeping Buttercups

In May and June we see a lot of creeping buttercups in sunny places on our driveway. A good patch is across from the maintenance shed. You can also see them all over the roadsides in Highlands. Like many wildflowers that are small in size, it makes up for it in numbers, appearing in spreading beds.



Southern Harebell and Prostrate Bluets

We even have our own little bluebell, the Southern Harebell. The plant is less than two feet tall, and the flower is less than an inch long, but it is pretty if you get up close to it, as the picture on the left below did. On the right is a bed of prostrate bluets, which are abundant in April by the Adirondack chairs.



Daisies and Asters (composite family)

Of course, we have planted daisies by the chairs by the field, but daisies are also wild (although not native) in the area, and probably the most common is the Ox Eye Daisy. Smaller and less showy are the various forms of wild asters, mostly violet-colored or white, with yellow or brown centers.



Ox eye Daisy



Aster (one of many examples)

All of the flowers of the composite family have flowers that are not simple. They either have inflorescences (many little flowers that seem to be one big flower, like Snakeroot or Goldenrod) or have, like daisies and asters, two parts: a central disk with tube-like flowers all pressed together, and a sunbeam-like part with individual rays emanating from the center. Other examples are Black-eyed Susans, Coreopsis ('Tickseed'), Fleabane, Goldenrod, Joe-Pye Weed, and Snakeroot (which is toxic to cows, and to humans who drink cows' milk tainted with it). All of which we have here at VZ Top.



Coreopsis



Black-eyed Susan



Snakeroot



Fleabane (it's small!)



Joe-Pye Weed (it's tall!)



Goldenrod (it's long!)

Touch-me-not and Turk's Cap Lily

Later in the summer we have a lot of touch-me-nots around VZ Top Road itself (our 'driveway'). The most common for us is the spotted variety, which is orange-yellow with many reddish spots. The pale variety, which is all yellow, can also be found on our driveway. They get their name not from the flower but from the mature seed pod, which 'explodes' when touched. The flower is not attached to the stem at the bottom, like you would expect, but at the rim of the 'cup'. An even stranger looking plant is the Turk's Cap Lily, a true lily, of which we have at least a few on the driveway.



Spotted Touch-me-not



Pale Touch-me-not



Turk's Cap Lily

Michaux's Saxifrage

This wildflower is not very pretty (to me, at least), but is distinctive and abundant, clinging as it does to the rocks that drip water from above us. The leaves at its base are green with hints of red, and the flowers are tiny and white. It is named after Andre Michaux, an early botanical explorer of this area. There is a plaque dedicated to him on Main Street across from the pharmacy.



Blackberry and Strawberry

We have a number of blackberry bushes sprinkled among our other plants. The book *Great Smoky Mountain Wildflowers* has this to say about them: “Blackberries are among the first plants to become established after forest fires, ‘blow-downs’, or other disturbances. The woody, arching canes reach a height of 4 to 8 feet the first year, bear flowers and fruit the second year, and then die, remaining upright for another year or so. After early summer flowering, fruits ripen from early July through August, depending on the elevation.” As for strawberries, they are less common here.



Hydrangea

Many suburban gardens have cultivated hydrangeas, and we have some lovely examples of that variety, but there is also a wild hydrangea native to this area. It has big, round leaves and white flowers (actually, inflorescences), typically in lacecap form rather than mopheads.



Woodland Spiderwort (and Stonecrop)

The leaves of the spiderwort plant are blade-like, and the flower has three petals. It is typically violet with yellow anthers on top of each stamens. Its Latin name, *Tradescantia virginiana*, was coined by the famous botanist Carl Linnaeus to honor the English father and son naturalists John Tradescant Sr. and Jr. The son had traveled to Virginia and found it there, bringing it back to England in 1629. It is pictured here next to what looks like a pot of stonecrop, a sedum variety that is also native to this area.



Fire Pink and Flame Azalea

This showy red flower is of the Pink family, but it is clearly red. It is about a foot tall and likes steep banks. We have a few that show in later summer. The flame azalea is a deciduous rhododendron native to the area. There are some on the lower part of Hudson road as you come up from the golf course. William Bartram, the botanical explorer of the 1700's (after whom the Bartram Trail is named) called it "the most gay and brilliant flowering shrub yet known".

