

It's showtime

Wildflowers flaunt their colors

By DENNIS ROSENBLUM

One of nature's briefest and least-noticed shows is on right now. And believe it or not, Livonia has one of the best spots around to catch a look.

The show is put on by spring wildflowers — a colorful array of small plants. The place to look is in the woods at Bicentennial Park on Seven Mile between Farmington and Newburgh roads.

The show is so fleeting because sunlight to the low-lying flowers is cut off when the trees above them get their summer foliage. The flowers wilt.

"They have to crowd their entire life cycle into a short period," says Roger Sutherland, a biology instructor at Schoolcraft College. Some flowers stay in bloom only 4-5 days; others last up to three weeks.

Sutherland is leading this weekend's wildflower walk, the third and last through the park's 2 1/2 miles of trails, with help from some of his students.

AT LEAST 55 species of sprightly named wildflowers have been identified within the 40-acre site since Sutherland first took one of his classes through on a tour — everything from a wild lily-of-the-valley and various violets to dwarf ginseng, hairy Solomon's seal, round-lobed hepatica and Dutchman's breeches.

Most of the species can be found elsewhere. But rarely are so many found on such a small plot.

"In an area like Livonia, I have never seen woods with such vitality," Sutherland says. "You can see a great deal of wildflowers in a small distance."

"You see how quickly things happen. This whole carpet has to complete its life cycle in a very short time."

The "carpet" is one of three zones which biologists use to explain the life inside a wooded area. The carpet is the

life along the ground. The "understory" is mainly the younger trees. And the "canopy," the tops of the older trees, shades everything under it from sunlight in the summer.

Each zone, for instance, attracts certain kinds of birds, according to Sutherland. Woodpecks stay near the ground to forage for food, while orioles stick to the canopy for seeds.

TO THE UNINITIATED, the existence of so many species can come as a great surprise. Most city folks, used to thinking of the outdoors in terms of trees and birds, never look at the tiny things popping through the ground next to their feet.

And since most people don't get out in the woods until later in the summer, they never see most of the flowers, which are by then long gone.

There is even an entire folklore attached to the wildflowers. "Often these early plants were named by the way they were shaped," Sutherland says. "If a plant looked like a body part, it was used for ailments in that part."

Hepatica (also called liverwort), for instance, one of the more common species in Bicentennial Park, was thought to resemble a liver. Hence, it would have been used for hepatitis, an inflammation of the liver.

"If it looked like an anatomical part, they thought it must be good for that part," Sutherland says.

Others, such as bishop's cap or Dutchman's breeches, were thought to look like their namesakes.

Hepatica varies from white to purple, the color being an indication of soil acidity. Only slight changes are involved, according to Sutherland, and purple, pink and white varieties are found growing side by side.

THE SIX TRAILS in the park were

The annual wildflower walk through the trails of Bicentennial Park's woods will be held 1-3 p.m. Sunday. The guided tour is free, sponsored by the Schoolcraft College Biology Department with the Western Wayne County Conservation Club.

The park entrance is on Seven Mile Road between Farmington Road and Newburgh. Follow signs to the wildlife preserve.

Instructor Roger Sutherland, one of the guides, says the weather has been perfect for a good show. "It should be just about perfect," he says.

built over three years by numerous volunteers, including Boy Scouts who earned Eagle badges, apprentices at a local iron workers union and members of the Wolverine Four Wheelers, a club of off-road vehicle aficionados.

"A couple guys worked 11 weekends straight in the winter. It really took a lot of work," says Hank Chrusciel, a member of the Western Wayne County Conservation Club, who has watched over the woods and flowers like a proud father. He met Sutherland when a Schoolcraft class came through on a tour while Chrusciel was working on the trails.

"Man's moving into all these woods," says Chrusciel. "We tried to save Volks Woods at Six Mile and Newburgh from these guys with the condominiums, but they said they had to get their houses in there. In another 40-50 years, we ain't gonna have nothing."

"Why can't we preserve it now?" he asks. "We still gotta look forward to our kids."

Chrusciel makes no claim to being

an expert on wildflowers — he yields to Sutherland on the scientific stuff, but he never gives a second thought to the worth of preserving the woods.

"You've really got to be out there to see 'em coming," he says of the wildflowers. "People really don't know what they're missing."

Besides the flowers, the Bicentennial woods is home for all sorts of wildlife — including hordes of mosquitos which soon will take over the swampy land.

Wild onions already abound and wild strawberries are on the way. A variety of birds make a racket in the morning and early evening. Deer, squirrels and pheasants have been seen. Chrusciel once spotted the remains of a rabbit that had fallen prey to a hungry fox.

One type of butterfly spends all winter in the woods and is friendly enough to land on a passing shoulder.

Few deer cans remain; Chrusciel says the state's ban on disposable bottles took care of that. Litter is slight, and Chrusciel laughs about the two pair of underwear he found a ways inside.

One tree, a winged euonymus, is normally not found in a woods; Sutherland thinks a bird must have flown in with a seed.

CHRUSciel and Sutherland both are concerned about a school of thought that woods should be thinned out to make them easier for people to walk through. And they worry about trees being cut for firewood.

"You've got to have a complete community or you won't have anything," says Sutherland. "The organism is the woods."

"If you go into the woods and clean it out, you're gonna have a nice park. But you're not gonna have woods for too long."



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