

The Writings of Eloise Butler



Plum Blossoms, Skunk Cabbage, and Modest Jack-in-the-Pulpit among May Arrivals That Please Lover of Life in the Woods - May 14, 1911

From a distance thickets of the thorny, still leafless, Wild Plum [*Prunus Americana*] now seem covered with snowflakes, the illusion being due to myriads of white blossoms. We find the resultant red and yellow, somewhat puckery fruit not unpalatable, if the birds do not forestall us in harvesting it.

And the hard or Sugar Maple [*Acer saccharum*] becomes conspicuous by reason of its drooping sprays of cream colored flowers, swaying on threadlike stems. The hard maple is certainly our finest deciduous tree. When grown in the open it forms a compact dome-like head, which affords refreshing shade from summer's heat. The leaves usually turn a bright yellow in the autumn. This tree will prove an ornament of stately beauty for the street or lawn, and a beneficent testimonial to the wisdom of the planter, calling forth the gratitude of countless passersby, long after he is dust.



American Plum, *Prunus Americana*



Skunk Cabbage, *Symplocarpus foetidus*.

To turn to herbs, the Skunk Cabbage [*Symplocarpus foetidus*] is one of our earliest spring flowers, for it literally thaws through the soil of the icebound marshes. You will have a greater respect for Dame Nature's ability as a packer if you take apart the leaf bud made up of many leaves tightly rolled one within another and smaller and smaller in the center. The bud expands into a clump of large leaves, from which the name cabbage is derived. The disagreeable odor is attractive to flies, which find a shelter from the cold within its purplish-red, hood-like spathe and pay rent by pollinating the flowers. The spathe - the showy part of the inflorescence - is merely a large leaf enwrapping numerous minute flowers set on a fleshy axis.

It is always well to get at the roots of things. If you dig deep down into the muck you will discover a stout subterranean stem, from which spring many roots ringed like angleworms. These roots have contracted like muscles, thereby forming the rings and giving the stem a deep, safe anchorage in the earth. This is only one of the many instances of self-burial by a "pull on the stem."

More agreeable and better known members of the Arum family are Calla [*Calla palustris*.] and Jack-in-the-Pulpit [*Arisaema triphyllum*]. In the case of the Jacks, the upper part of the fleshy flower axis is naked and is used as a support of the roof of the pulpit, or spathe. The small, simple flowers at the base of the axis are without floral leaves and are usually separated, namely, some of the Jacks bear only pollen producing flowers, and others, which in the course of time will develop seeds. The leaves of the

Jacks are branched and made up of three leaflets. The seed-producing Jack usually bears a pair of these branching leaves in place of the one carried by the pollen-bearing Jack.

For the individual producing the seed must manufacture food for storage in them as well as in the onion-shaped, subterranean bulb, which gives another name - Indian turnip to the plant. The Indians used the turnip, after pressing out the poisonous sap, as a farinaceous food. Jack-the-Jester has, of course, the reputed wisdom of former times; but you'll get no drippings of it, unless you frequent the sanctuary of the wilderness. But even as a preacher, he cannot refrain from some foolish pranks.



Jack-in-the-pulpit red mature berries of late summer.
Arisaema triphyllum

No one would be astonished to find, as is sometimes the case, two Jacks fraternally occupying the same pulpit; but an observer was doubled up with laughter to see a Jack holding forth in two united pulpits.

Only the student, or one versed in wood lore, would recognize Jack, when he first pricks through the ground, in the form of a slender, slightly curved, sharp-pointed bud, with a protective sheath mottled like snake skin. Again, but few connect the last stage of seed-bearing Jack with the crowded bunch of bright red berries so common in late summer.

It is a far cry from Arum to the Portulaca family [now Purslane], to which the much beloved Spring Beauty

belongs. The spring beauty is local, but it brightens large patches of low woodlands, which it chooses for an abiding place. Spring beauty of Minneapolis (*Claytonia virginica*) is a low, slender plant with narrow leaves which come from a dark brown triangular tuber imbedded in the earth. The flowers are dainty white bells striped with pink, and in masses thickly carpeting the earth are a joy to the eye.

Notes:

The text of this article, along with a photos of Jack-in-the-Pulpit, Skunk Cabbage, Spring Beauties and Plum trees (by Mary Meeker), was published on Sunday May 14, 1911 in the *Sunday Minneapolis Tribune*. It was one of a series of weekly articles Eloise Butler published in 1911 to help acquaint the public with her newly established Wild Botanic Garden in Glenwood Park Some of the plants she discusses are extant in the Garden today. In brackets within the text, and in the notes, have been added the necessary common name or scientific name, that she did not list in her article. Nomenclature is



Jack-in-the-pulpit in mid-spring.
Arisaema triphyllum



Virginia Spring Beauty,
Claytonia virginica.

based on the latest published information from *Flora of North America* and the *Checklist of the Vascular Flora of Minnesota*.

Photo of Eloise Butler, ca. 1920, at top of page courtesy Minneapolis Public Library. Other photos ©G D Bebeau or as credited.

The Wild Botanic Garden in Glenwood Park, became the "Native Plant Reserve" and was then renamed the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden in 1929.