

Picturing the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky for Reforestation and Spiritual Healing

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Lexington is widely known as the horse capital of the world, and when traveling I have had many people compliment the region because of our beautiful horse pastures filled with lush grasses and old trees. But, most of the contemporary meadows and woods are inhabited by exotic non-native plants in contrast to the native species that once graced Central Kentucky's natural areas. When I discovered my first native plant the beginning of a realization was underway, a spiritual awakening. My perceptions changed involving the natural surroundings today and how landscapes must have appeared differently when the first European settlers arrived in Kentucky during the mid to late 1700's. I realized how rare truly wild places have become. And I asked the fundamental question: what plants, animals, and landforms characterized the Bluegrass Region historically; and what can we do today to conserve, preserve and restore pieces of the original natural features? We can begin to understand the forests, savannas, and meadows that once occurred locally by finding which species still grow in the vicinity of creeks, rivers, and less disturbed areas surrounding Lexington such as in Bourbon, Harrison, Scott, Jessamine, Woodford, and Garrard counties. In these rural areas a few distinct plant communities still persist. A savanna is recognized by flat to gently rolling open pasture with scattered trees and some areas of dense forest regeneration, in abandoned areas and riparian corridors. The wide spreading branches of the stately bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) can reach out and sweep the ground, sometimes living over 400 years. Once abundant in these savanna-woodlands were such beautiful plants as prairie rose (*Rosa setigera*), wild bamboo (giant cane, *Arundinaria gigantea*), golden alexanders (*Zizia aurea*), meadow sunflower (*Helianthus tuberosus*), yellow hyssop (*Agastache nepetoides*), New England aster (*Symphotrichum nove-anglae*), wild senna (*Senna marilandica*), common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) and Maryland figwort (*Scrophularia marilandica*) among others, plus the federally endangered running buffalo clover (*Trifolium stoloniferum*).



Bluegrass Woodland with Running Buffalo Clover

In Central Kentucky, a special type of bur oak savanna existed named the Bluegrass Woodland-Savanna. In this community the diversity of trees was remarkable. Prevalent trees included chinkapin oak (*Quercus muhlenbergii*), Shumard's oak (*Quercus shumardii*), blue ash (*Fraxinus quadrangulata*), black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*), Kentucky coffeetree (*Gymnocladus dioica*), black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), and hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*). The open woodlands are among the rarest ecosystems currently; but efforts are being made to restore diversity at a preserve called Griffith Woods near Cynthiana. The forests of the region are more familiar and are represented by good examples along the Kentucky River Palisades on steep slopes at preserves such as Raven Run, Tom Dorman, Sally Brown, Jim Beam, Floracliff, and Lower Howard's Creek. Bluegrass forests are composed of trees such as chinkapin oak, Shumard's oak, shellbark hickory (*Carya lanciniosa*), basswood (*Tilia americana*), Ohio buckeye (*Aesculus glabra*), sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), white ash (*Fraxinus americana*) and blue ash. In spring, these forests are carpeted by ephemeral wildflowers including sessile trillium (*Trillium sessile*), white trout lily (*Erythronium albidum*), blood root (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), twin leaf (*Jeffersonia diphylla*), spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*), shooting star (*Dodecatheon meadia*), and dwarf larkspur (*Delphinium tricorne*). A wildflower like broad leaved spiderwort (*Tradescantia subaspera*) is the perfect native garden plant since it has continuous blooms from June to September. In addition, Short's aster (*Symphotrichum shortii*), zig-zag goldenrod (*Solidago flexicaulis*), and white snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*) brighten up fall with their late September to early October blossoms. The third special plant community in Central Kentucky is the wet meadow. Many wildflowers still grow along creeks and McConnell Springs is a wonderful example of the most unique feature of the Bluegrass landscape. Formally classified as a limestone spring (with alkaline pH), these cold, ground water fed wetlands contain plant species that are adapted to an influx of water with low acidity and high amounts of dissolved calcium created from the eroding limestone bedrock. Plants characteristic of this habitat type include swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), monkey flower (*Mimulus alatus*), blue lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*), cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*), and historically meadow anemone (*Anemone canadensis*). These wetland species are the perfect addition to the rain garden where they can be combined with native grasses and sedges to help infiltrate rainwater during downpours. To recreate and sustain biodiversity of the indigenous wildflowers in the Bluegrass Region, invasive species such as bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera maackii*) and winter creeper (*Euonymus fortunei*) should be removed and replaced with native plants. Once native plant communities are established, seeds can be collected every year, and these seeds will allow for the expansion of your garden. Reconnecting with nature will be facilitated when we can bring these lovely flowers home in small, short plantings or large, tall areas. Combinations of native plants that bloom at different times can lend color to the landscape throughout the growing season. A good way to start is to pick three to five species of similar height. In sunny areas wild senna, yellow hyssop, common milkweed, wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), or New England aster can be combined with deer tongue grass (*Dichanthelium clandestinum*). In part shade, wildflowers such as golden alexanders, Short's aster, zig-zag goldenrod, and wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) can make an excellent short groundcover along with silky rye (*Elymus villosus*) and woodland brome (*Bromus pubescens*). For rain gardens I recommend the grasses Virginia rye (*Elymus virginicus*), river oats (*Chasmantheum latifolium*), and wood reed (*Cinna arundinacea*); plus wildflowers such as swamp milkweed, cup plant, and zig-zag aster (*Symphotrichum prenanthoides*) but not monkey flower or blue lobelia because these species have a tendency to die if the soil becomes too dry. The trick is to carefully observe the growth of wildflowers over several seasons to match their preferred habitats to your yard's soil conditions. In this way we can become one with nature by witnessing the fluctuations of life in and around our environs. By continuing to plant wildflower seeds year after year you will be sure to have a successful wildflower garden contributing to the ecological restoration of the beautiful Inner Bluegrass Region!