Look Down IN THE WOODS

When you walk in the woods, what do you see? Some people look up at treetops and watch squirrels and birds chatting in the branches. Some people look around at the leaves and bark and bushes. When I walk in the woods, I like to look down at the wild plants that decorate the forest floor. Some look like miniature pine trees. Some have flowers. Others have bright red, blue, or white berries. Some have fat leaves as big as your hand. Some have skinny leaves. I like to learn the names of plants and find out interesting things about them.

Here are some forest floor treasures you can look for on your next walk through the north woods. You probably won't see all of them in one place, at one time. But if you look hard enough, I'll bet you can find some of them.

BY MARY HOFF

Sarsaparilla (left) and clintonia or bluebead-lily (right) bloom on the forest floor. Photograph by Richard Haug.

Bunchberry
Cornus canadensis

FUN FACT
Cornus canadensis is bunchberry's scientific name, which gives people around the world a shared term for living things.

Bunchberry plants grow low to the ground—in patches on the forest floor, often beneath pines and other coniferous trees or in bogs, where the soil is acidic. They like partial sun and moist, acidic soil.

RICHARD HAUG

Each bunchberry plant has a whorl of four to six round, pointed leaves. In the spring, bunches of tiny, greenish flowers surrounded by four white bracts (leaves that look like petals) pop open. By midsummer the flowers have dropped and bright red berries grow.

Many forest creatures use this plant for food. Birds such as vireos and spruce grouse eat the berries. Azure butterfly caterpillars nibble on the leaves. Moose gobble up the plants, stems and all. But the plants can grow back from *rhizomes*—rootlike stems that grow underground.

RICHARD HAUG

FUN FACT
Bunchberry flowers open in less than half a millisecond—one of the fastest plant movements known. The rapid motion flings pollen into the air, where it rides on a breeze to other bunchberry blossoms.

Wild Sarsaparilla
Aralia nudicaulis

Wild sarsaparilla spreads out from a tall, thin stalk 1 to 2 feet high—like an elf-umbrella made of leaves. It likes to grow in shady spots, but you can find it in other places too. In early summer golf-ball-size clusters of little white flowers appear on a separate stalk. The flowers are replaced in mid- to late summer by deep purple berries.

People brew root beer from the rhizomes. White-tailed deer and moose love to eat sarsaparilla leaves in spring. Birds eat the berries and spread the seeds in their droppings. Bears also eat sarsaparilla berries and spread seeds in their scat.

If a fire burns through the forest and wipes out the plant tops, sarsaparilla plants survive by sending up new shoots from their rhizomes.

MARILYN GLADITSCH

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FUN FACT
If you hold a sarsaparilla plant high above your head and let go, it will float like a parachute down to the ground.

Mary Hoff is a freelance science writer and frequent contributor to this magazine.

Ground-Pine
Lycopodium obscurum

It looks like a miniature evergreen tree, but ground-pine—also known as princess pine—is a relative of ferns. It grows ankle- to knee-tall in sunny or shady spots in cool, damp forests. It spreads by sending out rhizomes.

Like real pine trees, ground-pine stays green all winter. Because it resembles a tiny Christmas tree, it's popular in holiday decorations. Ground-pine has also been used as a medicine.

FUN FACT
Ancient ancestors of the ground-pine stood 100 feet tall. Nowadays, they reach heights of about 12 inches.

RICHARD HAUG

Starflower
Trientalis borealis

Like constellations sparkling in the night sky, the bright white blossoms of the starflower stand out from the forest floor beneath both evergreen and deciduous trees. Starflower blooms in May and June—even later in northern Minnesota. Look for one to two white, star-shaped blossoms, a little bigger around than a pencil eraser, emerging from a whorl of pointed leaves about as long as your finger. The blossoms attract bumblebees and other bees, which pollinate the plants as they search for food.

The starflower's scientific name, *Trientalis,* tells us it stands about one-third of a foot tall and *borealis* tells us it is a northern plant.

FUN FACT
The starflower blossom often has seven petals—an unusual trait among flowers anywhere.

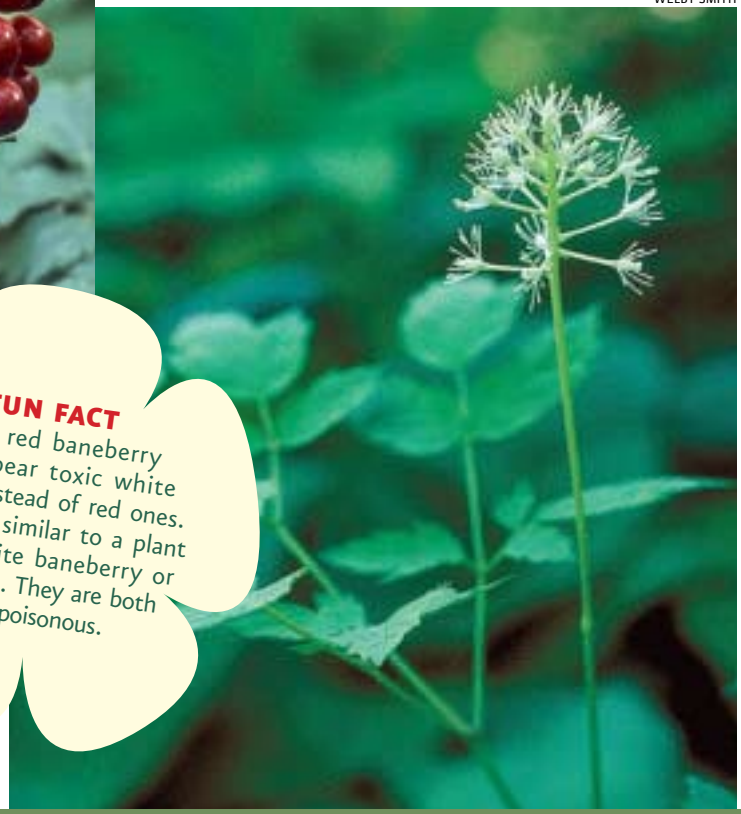
RICHARD HAUG

Red Baneberry
Actaea rubra

If you see a bushy-looking plant, 1 to 2 feet tall, with fluffy clusters of tiny white flowers in spring or deep red berries in summer, you might be looking at red baneberry. This plant has many pointed, sharply toothed, dark green leaves. It grows in damp, shady spots under pines or in sugar maple woods. The white flowers clustered atop a slim stalk look like a Fourth of July sparkler. The berries are bunched like tiny red grapes, each on a little stalk. But don't eat them! Baneberry means "poison berry"—the leaves and roots are poisonous too.

STAN TEKIELA

WELBY SMITH



FUN FACT
Some red baneberry plants bear toxic white berries instead of red ones. They look similar to a plant called white baneberry or doll's-eyes. They are both very poisonous.

Rose Twisted-Stalk
Streptopus roseus

NOT-SO-FUN FACT
Rose twisted-stalk is sometimes called "scootberry" because people who tried to eat its berries got "the scoots" (diarrhea). Don't eat these berries!

The stem on this plant looks like it doesn't know which way to go as it zigzags from one pointed leaf to another. Pink striped, bell-like flowers emerge near the base of the leaves in May or June. In late summer the flowers give way to red berries. Good clues to the identity of this plant: twisted stalk, leaves staggered rather than opposite each other, and parallel veins on each leaf.

Look for rose twisted-stalk in cool, shady places under deciduous trees such as maple, basswood, birch, and aspen.

STAN TEKIELA

MIKE LEE, DNR

Wintergreen
Gaultheria procumbens

Wintergreen adds a touch of spice to the forest floor. The thick, shiny leaves of this ground-hugging plant give off a strong, fresh smell if you crush them. They are the source of oil of wintergreen, which is used as a flavoring. They also contain methyl salicylate, the active ingredient in aspirin.

In June, wintergreen produces waxy, white flowers that hang down like tiny bells. Bumblebees pollinate the flowers. Later in the summer and fall, look for red berries, which deer, grouse, and other animals eat.

FUN FACT
As the name suggests, wintergreen leaves stay green all winter.

RICHARD HAUG

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DICK SCOTT, DEMBINSKY PHOTO ASSOCIATES

Bluebead-Lily
Clintonia borealis

The three to five leaves of the bluebead-lily look like long, pointed, shiny green tongues sprouting from the forest floor. In late spring a 6- to 10-inch-tall leafless stalk holds small yellow, lilylike flowers. Dark blue berries replace the flowers by midsummer. These beadlike berries are poisonous. Look for bluebead-lilies in damp forests.

FUN FACT
The first part of this plant's scientific name *Clintonia* was named for DeWitt Clinton, who was governor of New York in the early 1800s and liked to study plants.

RICHARD HAUG

Wild Strawberry
Fragaria virginiana

BILL LEA, DEMBINSKY PHOTO ASSOCIATES

If you look close to the ground alongside a sunny path in the woods, you might spy the bright red berries of the wild strawberry. Each leaf has three leaflets that look like toothy ovals. The berries look just like the strawberries you find at the market or in your garden, only much tinier. They taste better too! In early June look for white, five-petaled flowers with a yellow center. Both the flower and the berry grow at the tip of a stiff stem.

MARILYN GLADITSCH

FUN FACT
Strawberries are members of the rose family.

Large-Leaved Aster
Aster macrophyllus

If you see a plant that stands up to a foot tall with big heart-shaped leaves covering the forest floor, you are probably looking at large-leaved asters. This common plant prefers the dry part of the woods.

Aster is Latin for *star.* And in late summer, the aster's petals of blue, lavender, or white surround a disk of small yellow flowers. Together, they look like a star. After being pollinated by bees and other insects, the flowers produce seeds with fluff.

To help cure headaches, some American Indians brewed tea from the roots of large-leaved asters.

RICHARD HAUG

FUN FACT
This plant's big, soft leaves have a reputation as a pretty good emergency substitute for toilet paper. It's also known as "lumberjack's toilet paper."

TEACHER FACT
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