

## Monongahela National Forest - A Blooming Schedule

By Maurice Brooks



This is a brief catalog of some of our favorite plant displays in West Virginia. It suggests times to see them, and how to get there. Dates given are only suggestive; in any given year vagaries of weather can upset any natural calendar by a week or more.

I know of no other area in West Virginia which displays so many botanical climaxes as Dolly Sods. There will be frequent references to it. I have tried, however, to cover the state a little more thoroughly, and to follow a chronological pattern from spring to late autumn.

### **May 10 - 15**

A sight that most people miss, and don't believe until they see it, is the bloom of service trees ("sarvis" to the natives) on Dolly Sods. The quickest way is to Davis, then southeast on West Virginia Route 32, through Canaan Valley, and to an intersection, and sharp left to Lanesville (5 miles) and Dolly Sods (9 miles). Just beyond Lanesville the route enters Monongahela National Forest, and the road is limestone rock to the top of Allegheny Front. At the summit take Forest Service Route 75, and cruise its length to a terminus at Bear Rocks where the hawk waters gather in September. There are services, thousands of them, all along this road. Look also for clumps of wild bleeding-heart and the snow-white clustered blossoms of alder-leaved viburnum. If you wish you may return by an alternate route; turn right off Route 75 on a road marked "Petersburg", go right at the first blacktop road to an intersection with West Virginia Route 28. This takes you by Seneca Rocks, worthwhile at any season.

### **May 20 - 25**

During this period the catawba (purple) rhododendrons should be at their best. This is another gift from the Carolina mountains, brought northward by New River. There are good displays in places along both rims of the New River Gorge, but perhaps the best place is Grandview State Park, nine miles beyond Beckley. Grandview has fine nature trails, and there should be many wild flowers.

### **May 25 - June 5**

Flame azalea time in our southern mountains, especially in Pocahontas County. You'll see the plants in a bewildering display of yellow, orange, and brick red along almost any of the side roads off West Virginia Route 28 south of Bartow. A particularly good one is on the "back" road from Cass to near the summit of

Back Allegheny Mountain at a junction with U.S. Route 250 west of Durbin. The Wesley Chapel Road near Green Bank is also excellent. Most of these roads are blacktop, and all are worth exploring.

### **June 1 -10**

At this season wet mountain meadows in upland areas may have colorful growths of Indian paintbrush, "painted cup." Like poinsettias, the brilliant scarlet floral bracts are not really petals, but modified calyx lobes. Where the plants grow in numbers they provide one of the brightest displays of late spring. The best areas I know are along U.S. Route 220 south of Franklin, Pendleton County. If you can, continue on southward into Monterey, Virginia, and on toward Hot Springs. This is scenic country at all seasons, and has a wealth of wild flowers. About June 5 a meadow twelve miles south of Monterey may be filled with delicate blue wild hyacinths, tall, slender and attractive.

### **June 10 - 20**

Back to Dolly Sods for the delightfully fragrant rosy azaleas, mountain shrubs which are much brighter than the more familiar pinkster azaleas (wild honeysuckles) of the lowlands. Best areas for rosy azaleas are toward the north end of Forest Service Route 75. Park at Red Creek campgrounds (water and toilets, plus picnic tables), or at the Bear Rocks terminus of this road. Near the terminus look for the five-petaled white blossoms of three-toothed cinquefoil, one of the real northern aristocrats of our mountains. Along roadside wet ditches and drains there may be cranberries in bloom, their pink blossoms with their petals bent backward like miniature shooting stars. If you are fortunate enough to be in this area in the dusk, listen to some of West Virginia's finest bird songsters hermit and Swainson<sup>1</sup>'s thrushes, winter wrens, and purple finches.

### **June 20 - July 1**

At higher elevations mountain laurel, one of our finest heaths, should be at its best. The shrubs growing at high elevations are much deeper pink (sometimes rosy red) than are lowland specimens. They are found along the Forest Service road to Gaudineer Lookout (Randolph and Pocahontas Counties), along U.S. Route 250 from the summit of Cheat Mountain southeastward into Virginia, and atop North Fork Mountain, just off U.S. Route 33, in Pendleton County (Germany Valley and Spruce Knob overlooks). Near this summit, on the eastern slope toward Franklin, the only known growth along a West Virginia highway of native white birches occurs.

To see highland mountain laurel at its best, however, we return to Dolly Sods. Along the length of Route 75 there are a myriad of the plants in a variety of pink shades. In some years the laurel and rosy azaleas overlap to make a challenge for North Carolina<sup>1</sup>'s famed "pink beds."

### **June 25 - July 10**

Ordinarily a peak time for rosebay rhododendron. West Virginia's state flower. Dolly Sods is good, so are areas along U.S. Route 219 between Parsons, Tucker County, and Elkins, and along U.S. Route 250 on the mountain slope above Durbin, Pocahontas County. My favorite, however, is the Stuart Forest Drive which leaves U.S. 33 seven miles east of Elkins, climbs the slopes of Cheat Mountain almost to Bickels Knob tower on its summit (4000 feet). and on through rich forest to a junction with U.S. 33 at Evenwood Gap. In many places this Forest Service road was cut through magnificent rhododendron stands. As you drive along it, be on the lookout for wild turkeys this is one of their good territories.

When the rhododendrons drop their blossoms in early summer, flowering trees and shrubs and woodland flowers become less conspicuous. There are still wild flowers along roads, in open fields, and in mountain bogs. Cranberry Glades, Pocahontas County, has notable displays of native orchids at this season.

### **July 1 - 10**

Pink orchids of two species should be open along the boardwalk which provides easy entrance to Cranberry Glades. Bog vegetation is sensitive to disturbance, and before the boardwalk was constructed great damage was being done by thoughtless visitors who tramped through the deep mosses, picked such showy flowers as interested them, and of course discarded them almost at once. The boardwalk through representative areas of two of the Glade openings has done much to save the unique native flora. In Flag Glade, right beside the walkway, are fine stands of rose pogonias and grass pinks, both attractive and interesting native orchids. There are mats of cranberries growing over the mosses, and if your eyes are sharp enough you may find tiny plants of round-leaved sundew, one of the extraordinary insect-catching species in the area. Over the weekend of July 4th, the Department of Natural Resources conducts an orchid pilgrimage, under expert guidance and open to any interested person.

### **July 15 - August 20**

At this point of time we leave flowers for a time, and turn our attention to native fruits. On Dolly Sods the services, bearing small apple-like reddish berries, are in full fruit. A handful of these makes a nice supplement to a luncheon, but you will have to contest for them with the birds and mammals. A very large number of species, both in feathers and fur, feed on services and find this early fruit a blessing, particularly as young birds of the year are now out of their nests, hungry, and learning about the world into which they have come. For about six weeks service berries are staple in the diet of a lot of wild things.

In the open parts of the Dolly Sods plateau there are thousands of acres of native blueberries and huckleberries, with blueberries being much more abundant. Both are edible, and you will learn the difference if you care to. Blueberries have a great many small seeds, so tiny that you will scarcely realize you are eating any. True huckleberries on the other hand have ten larger seeds, big enough to get into crevices between your teeth.

Also at this season there may be the showy scarlet fruits of red-berried elder, an earlier and much handsomer shrub than our black-fruited lowland elder. Both are excellent wildlife foods.

### **August 10 - 20**

This is period of lush roadside blooming, with early goldenrods, sunflowers, flaming cardinal lobelia, blue and white vervains, swamp milkweed, two species of bluebells, and a host of others. At this season a fine display may be expected along West Virginia Route 28 south from Bartow to Minnehaha Springs.

Pocahontas County, with its high average elevation, does not suffer, ordinarily, from summer drought; as a consequence, vegetation is likely to be lush when it may be sparse in lower, warmer, and drier areas. Another favorite area is in Highland County, Virginia, south of Monterey along U.S. Route 220. All of the species mentioned above are present, and they are joined by fine stands of Kansas gay feather, a prairie species which bears dense spikes of attractive lavender blossoms.

On Dolly Sods late August sees a fine showing of an interesting creamy-white primitive lily, a species with no common name in general use, but whose scientific genus is *Zygadenus*. It is to be enjoyed along the Northlands Trail, a circular trail which begins near the Red Creek campgrounds. With the lily are also

narrow-leaved gentians, blue in color, and several species of attractive goldenrods. Cranberries, abundant in wet, mossy areas, may be turning red at this time.

Another particularly fine primitive lily is feather fleece whose heads of fluffy whitish blossoms are borne on stalks three or four feet tall. On West Virginia Route 92 in Barbour County, just south of the Soul<sup>1</sup>'s Harbor Church, there is a stand of hundreds of these plants to the left of the highway (as you travel south). They are usually at their best about August 10. This showy wild flower deserves to be better known than it is.

### **September 20 -30**

At high elevations there are abundant asters and goldenrods, but the bulk of the flowering season is over. Along highways sourwood and other woody plants are assuming fall coloration, the gums in deep crimson and maroons especially noticeable along U.S. Route 119 between Morgantown and Grafton. The blueberries, chokeberries, and other shrubs on Dolly Sods are now in shades of red, and the whole landscape is colored accordingly. During this period the hawks are migrating southward, and on favorable days there may be a hundred or more hawk watchers on Bear Rocks. Cranberries are ready for harvest, and a good many near the headwaters of Red Creek.

### **October 15 -20**

Autumn foliage is the last great color season in West Virginia, and it usually peaks between these dates. Almost any road in the Allegheny Plateau section of the state is good for color; U.S. 119 between Morgantown and Grafton being excellent. A favorite circle drive of ours is from Bartow South on West Virginia 28 to Frost, then eastward on Route 84 into Virginia<sup>1</sup>'s George Washington National Forest and on to Vanderpool, and a junction with U.S. 220, then northward on 220 to Monterey and a junction with U.S. 250, then westward over three spectacular mountain ridges to Bartow. Between the second and third ridges along the headwaters of Back Creek, are active beaver ponds where working beaver may often be seen. Last fall we decided, after critical examination, that the western slope of Allegheny Mountain, two miles into West Virginia, had the highest color we had seen. The whole route is a riot of color, however. A word of caution motels in this area are crowded at this season; be sure you have reservations on any weekend.

### **October 15 - 30**

Of all our native trees, American mountain ash, a member of the rose family, bears the showiest fruits. This tree, often only a shrub, grows at higher elevations in the state, most often in rocky, exposed sites. It does not bear fruit every year, but when it does it is worth going long distances to see. There are good stands along the road to the summit of Spruce Knob, in Pendleton County, and there are some trees along West Virginia Route 93 from Davis northward by Stony River Lake. So far as I know it, however, the state<sup>1</sup>'s premier area for mountain ash is along the north end of the West Virginia Scenic Highway, 8-10 miles beyond the Cranberry Glades information center, Pocahontas County. The Scenic Highway turns at right-angles to West Virginia Route 39, from Mill Point, Pocahontas County, to Richwood, Nicholas County. In years of good fruiting there is a show of wild fruits here that rivals anything we have seen along the Blue Ridge Parkway or on Roan Mountain. The Scenic Highway is a delightful road whenever it is open to traffic (it is not maintained in winter). At the proper season there are stands of scarlet monarda, native lilies of several species, and good displays of azaleas, mountain laurel, rhododendron and deciduous holly. Nothing else, I think, compares with the mountain ash.

## **October 20 - November 10**

One of the latest botanical displays in West Virginia comes when mountain long-stemmed holly is in full scarlet fruit. These fruits, the color and size of small cherries, are borne on shrub-sized woody plants. This is a true holly, and like others of its kind has both male and female plants. Both have to be present for fertilization, and of course, only the females bear fruits. Long-stemmed holly is a genuine southern mountain endemic, reaching its northern known limits in West Virginia.

A particularly fine station for this is just off U.S. Route 250, between Huttonsville and Durbin. At the first westward summit of Cheat Mountain, the highway follows along an elevated plateau. Two miles east of this first crest an indistinct road, only a trail now, bears to the right. Actually, this is the route of the famous Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike, a road designed and engineered by Claudius Crozet, one of Napoleon Bonaparte<sup>1</sup>'s engineers who helped save the remnants of the Grand Army in the retreat from Moscow. Just a couple of hundred yards off U.S. 250, along this old grade, and bordering a small stream, Red Run, there are dense stands of holly. In a season of good fruiting it is worth the trip to see it. Here again, there may be competition; this is a favorite food for migrating sparrows, waxwings, thrushes, and many other birds. Turkeys and grouse take their share. It is a most useful, most beautiful, and in horticulture use, almost an unknown plant.

And don't forget your camera!