

# NATURE NOTES



## ANTS and our NATIVE PLANTS

by Aileen Merriam

Spring is here, and all around us, creatures and plants are moving and growing. Among the most active are the many varieties of ants. Usually we notice them only when they bother us! But ants have complex lives that interact with other parts of their environment. They are hugely important in nature — ants make up two-thirds of the biomass of all the insects on earth. They are constantly on the move. What are they doing? Why should we care?



white trillium

A large number of our common early spring flowers — the ones that bloom between snowmelt and leaf out — are dispersed by ants. Some wildflowers produce an extra-soft, fleshy part on the outside of their seeds; this is like candy to ants. Once a ripe seed drops to the ground, it is only a short time before an ant harvests it and carries it back to the ant nest. Here the ants bite into the "ant-snack" and feast on the oily, nutrient-rich contents.



large-flowered bellwort

When the soft part is eaten, the hard seed is discarded away from the nest in the ants' "compost pile" — just the place you want to be if you are a wildflower seed. The seed sprouts in this fertile location, and we have beautiful new flowers in our woods. Ants help to disperse the seeds of about 30 percent of our spring beauties, including bloodroot, wild ginger, trillium, fringed polygala, Dutchman's breeches, violet, bellwort and corydalis.



bloodroot

Ants have been recorded moving seeds up to 10 metres from the parent plant. Seeds buried by ants are less likely to be eaten by birds or rodents. And it has been shown that in some species, seed germination is faster when the soft appendage has been removed.

Next time ants bother you, consider their work in spreading our native wildflowers.



## Going Wild in Our Gardens

by Bea Heissler

Illustrations: Aileen Merriam

The United Nations has marked 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity to bring attention to the unprecedented loss of the world's species due to human activity. In Canada alone, 467 species of plants and animals have become extinct or are at risk. About 60 percent of these are in this predicament because of habitat loss. In Ontario, more than 190 species are at risk of extinction.

As landowners, we have the opportunity to contribute to the recovery of some of these species. A person with a yard has great potential to make a difference by growing native plants that provide not only a feast for the eyes but also shelter and food for creatures that depend on them.

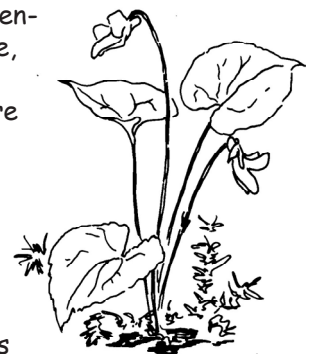


jack-in-the-pulpit

We do not contribute to global biodiversity by planting species originating from other countries. In fact, some garden favourites have caused serious ecological problems when a similar native species is forced to give up its niche in the natural community. Without the usual checks on population, these intruders can wreak havoc on the natural balance.

Native plants of this region are perfectly adapted to local conditions and have developed close relationships with other living things. Therefore, once established, these plants require no care and will continue to grace our yards whether we are there or not.

When we work with nature and live with consideration for those who naturally share our spaces, we help to ensure our own survival on this remarkable planet.



violet

For more information on native plants and plant sources, visit the North American Native Plant Society's website at [www.nanps.org](http://www.nanps.org) and the Canadian Wildlife Federation's website at [www.wildaboutgardening.org](http://www.wildaboutgardening.org).

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