

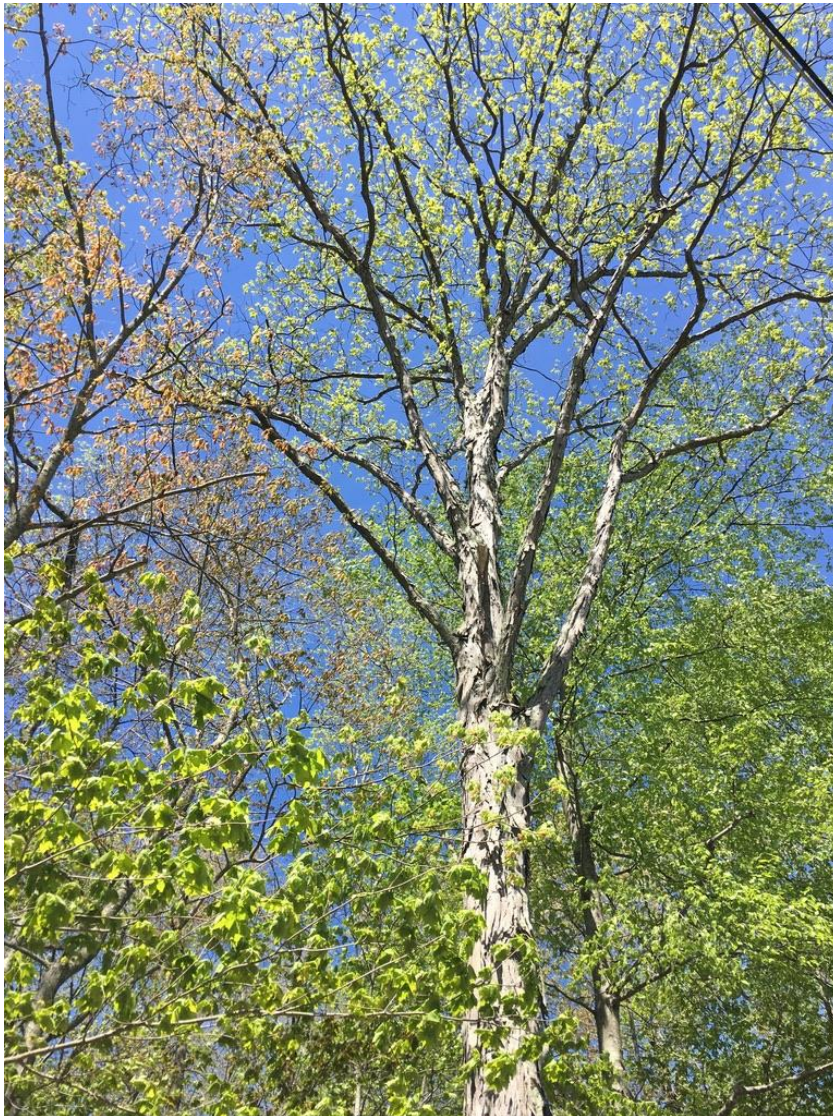
**Field Notes – Third Week of May**  
**Carrie Crompton**

**THE PASTEL OVERSTORY, CONTINUED**

It can be frustrating to identify mature trees in the spring unless one is very familiar with their bark patterns and leaf shapes. But just knowing the progression of bud break helps to narrow down the field.

Last week, if the top of a tree was crimson, it was most likely a red maple; if it was yellowish-green with “tassels,” it was most likely a sugar maple.

This week, fresh pink or white leaves are (largely) those of white oaks or cottonwoods; bright chartreuse leaves are (largely) those of other oaks, hickories, and ashes.



**Lower left: Leafed-out Sugar Maple (large, green)**  
**Upper left: New leaves of a White Oak (tiny, pink)**  
**Center: New leaves of Shagbark Hickory (tiny, chartreuse)**  
**Lower right: Leafed-out Black Birch (small, green)**



In the third week of May,

- Is there a general impression of “pinkness” to the leaves? This is likely a White Oak. In *A Natural History of Trees*, Donald Culross Peattie describes the White Oak:

If Oak is the king of trees, as tradition has it, then the White Oak, throughout its range, is the king of kings. The Tulip Tree can grow taller, and the Sycamore in the days of the virgin forest had gigantic boles, but no other tree in our sylvan has so great a spread. . . . Like the detail of a cathedral, the White Oak’s minor points are beauty too. When the leaves unfold they clothe the tree in a veil of vivid red gradually turning pink and then silvery white.

The progression is like this:



**White Oak (*Quercus alba*) leaves: vivid red to pink to silvery white and green.**



- Are the new leaves really high up and white, atop straight, tall trunks? The new leaves of Cottonwoods and Big-leaf Poplars are even whiter than the white oaks'. They don't. They have a different form from the White Oaks; their bark is deeply furrowed; and they are less common in Andover, though we have some beauties.



**Eastern Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*), May 20, Hebron Center Trail**

All the tiny white leaves at the top of the photo are cottonwood leaves. They will turn green by the end of May.



- The red and black oaks leaves break with an orangey color, and quickly turn a bright chartreuse. The leaves have *points*, as opposed to the rounded *lobes* of White Oak.



**Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*) leaves, May 19, Wales Road / Red Oak leaves overhead**

When my children were in Andover Elementary School, the students had a contest to name a “town tree.” The winning suggestion was Shagbark Hickory—a very good choice, I think! They’re majestic trees, and perhaps the easiest of all to identify in four seasons from their bark alone. We have many gorgeous specimens in Andover.



**Two Shagbark Hickories (*Carya ovata*) on Wales Road, May 19**





**Shagbark Hickory leaves unfurling . . .**



**and fully open**

Like the Black and Red Oaks, the White Ash trees open with a bright chartreuse color. From the ground, it can be hard to tell them apart by color alone; one needs to notice the bark, with its highly distinctive elongated-diamond pattern.



**White Ash (*Fraxinus americana*) in early leaf . . .**



**and fully open**



There are other trees flowering leafing out right now, of course, but I can't list them all! Here's a beauty that displays you probably recognize in full leaf:



**Sassafras (*Sassafras albidum*), with leaves and flowers opening . . . and leaves fully open**

Sassafras flower clusters are held up in a bouquet to entice pollinators. From now on, trees can't count on the wind to do their pollen dispersal for them. Next week, all the trees that have broken bud will be starting to cast shade, and the Sycamores and Black Locusts will be leafing out.

### **Understory Bloomers**

This week, the darkening understory is lit up by dogwoods and wild azaleas.



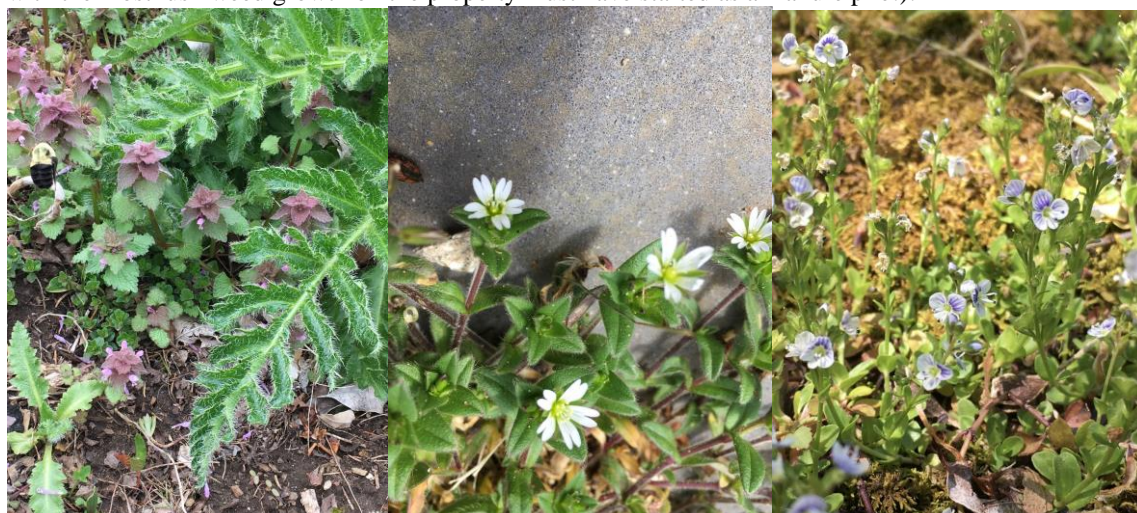
**Left: Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*), May 20, Cone Road**

**Right: Pinxterbloom Azalea (*Rhododendron periclymenoides*), May 20, Gay City**

## TIME TRAVEL ON LOCAL PATHS

A recent article in the *New York Times* recommends “time travel” as a distraction from Covid-19 isolation. I do like time travel, and tend to do it naturally as I watch the local flora unfold each spring.

I can’t step out of my front door without being reminded that our house sits on what was, in the 1740s, a 700-acre spread of land owned by Jonathan Swetland. Most of that acreage was farmed for two hundred years before it was subdivided in the late 1950s, and houses were built on 2-acre lots. The first few generations of farmers were Swetlands; in the 1840s, it seems, the family moved west and the Whites bought the land. Where I have my dooryard gardens, six generations of Swetlands and Whites pastured cows and horses. It’s the weeds on the property that remind me of this history: old field weeds. These are low-growing plants that need full sun and thrive on being “mowed,” whether by the teeth of livestock or by power mowers. Time-traveling, I imagine the farm animals grazing this hillside. I imagine the farmers loading hay into the loft of their two-story barn for the winter, shoveling manure out of the lower level, taking it by wagon or cart down to a heap at what is now our property line (the spot with the most lush weed growth on the property must have started as a manure pile!).



**Purple Dead-nettle**

**Mouse-ear Chickweed**

**Field Speedwell**

I was interested in the wildflowers long before I became a homeowner and a gardener, so I was familiar with all these “weeds” before I met them in a garden setting—I’d seen them in old fields! Now, when I encounter them surrounding my tulips or infiltrating the poppies, I silently name them before pulling them out and consigning them to the weed heap.

Between the lawn and the woods, we have swaths of old-field succession plants—numerous species of native goldenrods and asters that take over as soon as we stop mowing any patch of soil in New England. They are up and growing! They look weedy now, but they will make brilliant garden borders in the late summer, and provide nectar for thousands of pollinators. (Once a year, we mow them to ensure that the forest doesn’t reclaim this old pasture.)

Right at the edge, between lawn and goldenrod swath, I see two cinquefoils growing nearly side by side, and realize that one is originally from Europe, and one is considered to be native to the East Coast. I notice that one has 5 leaflets, the other 3. They are of the same genus, *Potentilla*, but different species. I realize—and now I am really time-traveling at warp speed—that they are cousins, descendants of a common ancestor. The ancestral population was broken up when the North America split apart from Eurasia, some 60 million years ago. The descendants on both sides of the Atlantic evolved and developed into different species. They must have been brought together again when British colonists started bringing plants and seeds here for their farms and gardens 400 years ago. A family reunion of sorts.





**Native Common Cinquefoil (*Potentilla simplex*)      . . .      European Rough Cinquefoil (*P. norvegica*)**

Now that I'm time-travelling, I have to remember that between the final split-up of Pangaea and the arrival of the first colonists from the Old World, there were several glaciations that wiped out all the vegetation in northern parts of Europe and North America. The most recent (the Laurentide Ice Sheet) reached its peak around 20,000 years ago. As the glacier retreated, spores of lichens and mosses blew in to settle on rock faces. Soil and seeds blew into the scoured landscape. Over centuries and millennia, the land was revegetated. Every "native" plant I see on my walks in Andover was established here at some point in the past 12,000 years or so, having been carried north or east by the wind and by generations of birds or mammals. Every "alien" plant I see was brought here by people at some point in the past 400 years, either intentionally or inadvertently. The wild strawberries (*Fragaria virginiana*) of the East coast have wild relatives in Europe, just as the cinquefoils do. Their ancestors were growing here millions of years ago; they were wiped out by glaciers, they returned, and here they are, growing in the May sun.

These low-growing sun-loving native wildflowers—cinquefoil and wild strawberry—are at their peak bloom just before the forest canopy finally closes in. And they have a trick for escaping the shade of encroaching forest: fast-growing runners!

Several of our loveliest native wildflowers are now blooming. Most are edge plants—happy in neither full sun nor full shade. They bloom on our roadsides and trail-sides, and in the woodland openings created where large trees have died or been cut down, creating a gap in the canopy.





**Red Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), May 18**

These columbines are growing in our old-field garden from seeds I collected on Bunker Hill Road. (The ones on Bunker Hill Road are slowly being overtaken by Poison Ivy and Virginia Creeper.)



**Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), May 18, Townsend Road**





**Pink Lady's-Slippers (*Cypripedium acaule*), Gay City, May 20**

This was my first Lady's-Slipper of the year, surrounded by other plants still in bud or just beginning to open. It's always a thrill to see them. I like to imagine Native American children, hundreds or even thousands of years ago, coming upon the first Pink Lady's Slippers blooming in the sun-dappled woods (with American Chestnut leaves breaking bud overhead) on a mild May afternoon and catching their breath in wonder and delight, just as I do, every May.

There is one week more of this glorious month. I'll be staying close to home, missing the company of family and friends, appreciating the beauties of Eastern Connecticut more than ever.

Till next week –  
Carrie