

**Field Notes – Fourth Week of October**  
**Carrie Crompton**

**THE LAST HURRAH**

One never knows which will be the last perfect day of the foliage season – so I took walks and kayak rides each day of the last week, luxuriating in the sunlight and the rich colors around me.



**October 22, Red maples, gray birches, and blueberries, Andover Lake margin**

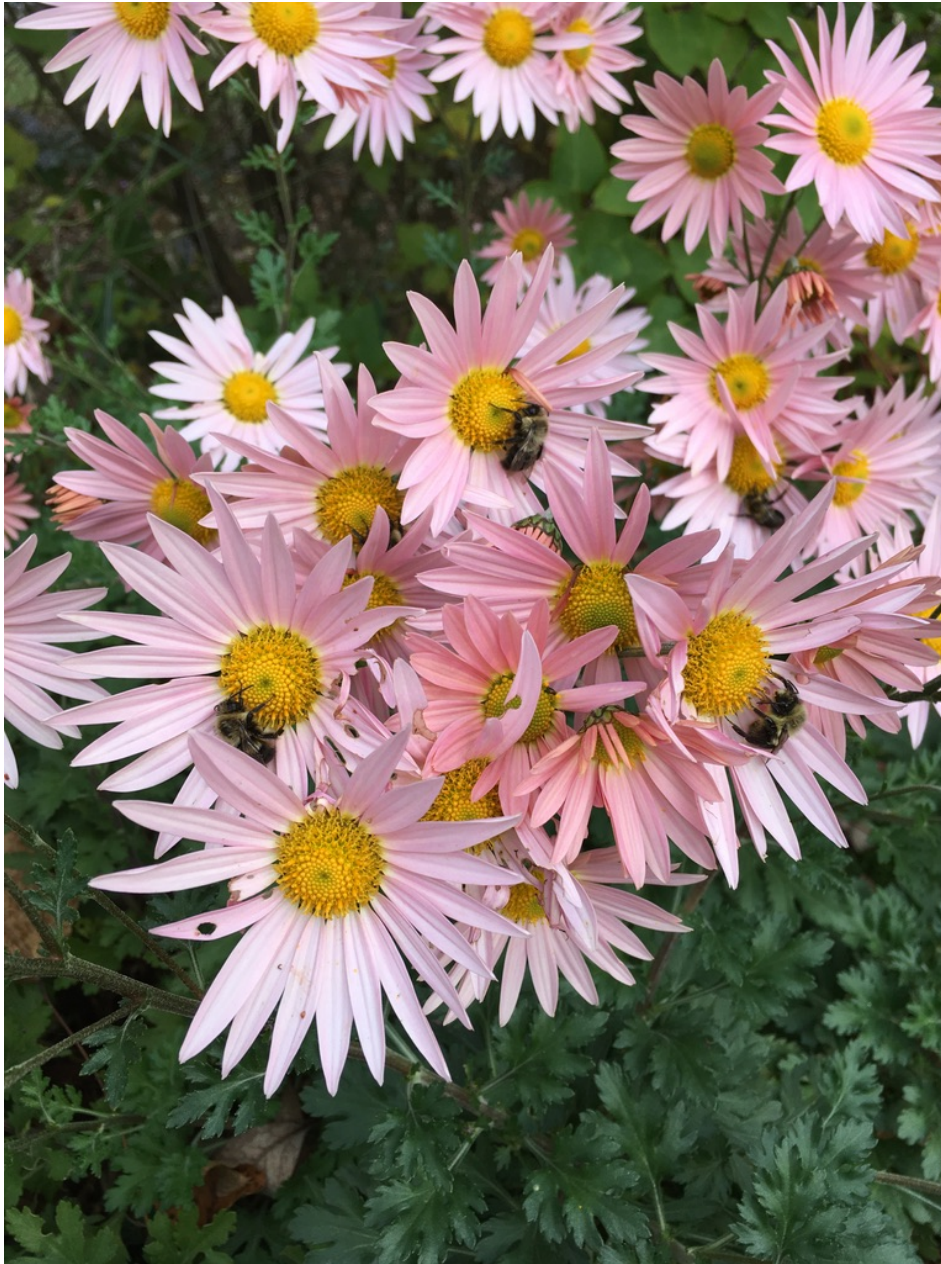




**October 24, Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) flowers on Hebron Center Trail**

The witch hazel's moment is late October, when its blossoms shine like silk ribbons on long, bare branches. The name doesn't really refer to anything having to do with witches – it's derived from an old English word related to dowsing – “wych,” meaning to bend.<sup>1</sup> And yet its eerie branching patterns and the fact that it still blooms on Halloween make it seem almost other-worldly. It is hard to wrap one's eyes around a single asymmetrically bursting blossom, and a whole branch is downright inscrutable!





**October 25, 4:30 p.m. Bumblebee dormitory on Chrysanthemums, our garden**

These garden mums never open until the latter part of October. They attract the very last cohort of pollinators and flower-petal-munching beetles. (I believe this cohort does not include next year's queens, which should be safely underground by now.) The bumblebees crawl around the disc flowers, nectaring slowly, whenever the sun is out and it's at least 50°. When the temperature drops to 49°, they stop moving. All week, I watched the thermometer and went out to check on them several times a day. Until the snow of October 30, I could see many bees going to sleep by 4:00 p.m. Now they're part of the duff under the snow.

**FIRST SNOW, OCTOBER 30**

What a difference from two weeks ago!





**Hop River, October 17**



**Hop River, October 30**



**Beech leaves and Hemlocks, Gay City, October 30 / Blueberry, Gay City, October 30**





**Witch hazel blossoms, Gay City, October 30**

The flowers are still magical, twinkling like lights through the snow.

### **FIRST KILLING FREEZE, OCTOBER 31**

The active, aboveground growing season of the deciduous plants is over. But it's not the end of green, photosynthesizing things in the environment. There are evergreen trees, evergreen mosses, evergreen clubmosses, and evergreen lichens still working whenever they can get enough light. The younger branches and twigs of most trees and shrubs have a layer of photosynthetic tissue—chlorenchyma—under the protective gray bark. (It's the flexible layer of green you see when you break a branch or a twig, that tells you it's living. Dead branches and twigs are brittle and have no green tissue.) Paper birch and beech trees have chlorenchyma under the relatively thin bark of their main trunks. This, too, is active in winter when the sun warms the bark; the carbohydrates produced from winter photosynthesis will help jump-start budbreak in the spring.<sup>ii</sup>

And it's not the end of root growth, which can continue as long as the root zone is not frozen.<sup>iii</sup> Growth is just happening at a much slower pace.



**Shining Clubmoss (*Huperzia lucidula*), Utley Hill Preserve, October 22**

My new normal will be, of course, spending lots of time indoors—but I am determined to get out to take field notes as often as weather permits. One of my projects for the winter is to learn to identify more of the mosses in the local woods. If we get enough of the right sort of snow, maybe I'll get better at identifying animal tracks.

This will be a long winter, without the usual festivities to punctuate it. Usually, I'd be anticipating Thanksgiving and Winter Solstice celebrations by now, but this year, I'm looking straight through to spring. Only twenty-three weeks till the first bloodroot! – and before that, I'll be looking for the first pussywillows and skunk cabbage flowers.

### **TAKING HEART FROM SKUNK CABBAGEDOM**

In September 1857, many American banks failed, the stock market tanked (the “Panic of 1857”), and the country sank into a financial depression. Winter was coming. Henry David Thoreau felt the despair in the society around him, and the seasonal depression within himself, and kept tromping, observing, and writing.

Thoreau's journal, October 31, 1857

If you are afflicted with melancholy at this season—go to the swamp and see the brave spears of skunk cabbage buds already advanced toward a new year. . . . Do they seem to have lain down to die, despairing of skunk cabbagedom? “Up and at 'em.” “Give it to 'em.” “Excelsior.” “Put it through.” These are their mottoes. Mortal human creatures must take a little respite in this fall of the year—their spirits do flag a little. There is a little

questioning of destiny . . . but not so with the skunk cabbage. Its withered leaves fall and are transfixed by a rising bud. Winter and death are ignored—the circle of life is complete. . . . They rest with spears advanced—they rest to shoot!

I actually went out looking for some skunk cabbage buds this morning, October 31, 2020, but they were not visible in the places I hoped to see them. More reason to keep tromping around, observing. I'm sure I'll see them on one of the 60° days forecast for the end of the first week of November.

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<sup>i</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “witch, wych.” Applied generally or vaguely to various trees having pliant branches.

<sup>ii</sup> Dave Anderson, Chris Martin, and Andrew Parrella, “Photosynthesis in winter,” (2019)  
<https://forestsociety.org/something-wild/photosynthesis-winter>

Paul Simons, “Bark takes a little light relief,” (2020)  
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/may/23/highereducation.science>

<sup>iii</sup> Michael Snyder, “What do tree roots do in winter?” (2017)  
[https://northernwoodlands.org/articles/article/what\\_do\\_tree\\_roots\\_do\\_in\\_winter](https://northernwoodlands.org/articles/article/what_do_tree_roots_do_in_winter)