

A Botanist's Musings on Hiking the Greenbelt at the FLPG Annual Meeting Nature Walk, in which he highlights a few overlooked Long Pond Greenbelt flowers and delivers an important caution about native flora.

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As a veteran botanist and student of the Long Pond Greenbelt for 16 years, I'm always mindful of calling attention to the wildflowers that still stud that woodland gem. I recall with regret some years ago, leading a walk for all comers in an undisclosed portion of the Greenbelt, pointing out some of the showy flora. Returning along that same route the next day, all the botanical beauties I'd pointed out were gone, replaced by holes dug hastily into the sand and loam. Lesson learned. I seldom lead general botanical walks any longer and when I do take people on a tour, I make sure that I stay away from locations and plants that might tempt the illicit rural gardeners among us.

Of course, the plants, animals and other life in the Greenbelt are legally protected from harvesting; excepting, of course, permitted hunting and fishing activities. But that seems to stop few of those determined kleptogardeners among us. Sadly, the net result of this plant pilfering is a depletion of our native plant diversity – it's the rare acid-loving Greenbelt transplant that survives relocation to an over-watered, over-fertilized, over-illuminated back yard garden – mostly they die after a season or two at the most, victims of too much of a good thing. And the spot in the Greenbelt forest where they once lived remains a disturbed excavation site, an easy entry point for invasive species like mile-a-minute plant, garlic mustard or oriental bittersweet – plants that further degrade our woodland areas.

Nevertheless, at the recent Friends of the Long Pond Greenbelt Annual meeting, I added a few comments on some plants noted during a short walk through the trails around a local pond in the area. From mosses to ferns to evergreens to flowering plants, the Greenbelt is home to a charming pine barrens community of plants – at any time of the growing season something is putting on a show of some kind, if you know what to look for. And, even in the winter, the aromatic qualities of so many species in the Greenbelt allow for an entertaining and stimulating “scratch and sniff” botany tour.

On this particular occasion, we encountered first up, shinleaf or pyrola, a common enough plant in the north woods, but less commonly seen here on Long Island. The tough white waxy flowers on a slender stalk rise from an evergreen rosette of shiny green roundish leaves.



Also present along the trail was the shinleaf's close relative, the spotted wintergreen. While not in full flower at the time of this walk, the evergreen leaves striped with white veins down their centers, were topped by flowering stalks laden with buds.



On the more prosaic side of the plant kingdom, the veined hawkweed's small yellow daisy-like flowers adorned several spots along the trail. The common name of this species refers to the prominent reddish veins on the leaves, unique among our local hawkweeds.



Also seen and enjoyed, despite its relative obscurity in a rich woodland setting, was the hair cap moss – an ad hoc common name that refers to the peculiar, but quite diminutive, covering of the spore capsule atop the fruiting moss at this time of year. The spore cases, while still green, can be eaten as a tender nibble, one of the few palatable mosses in our woods. Several of our younger trekkers tried this natural salad bar and reported that it was good, if a bit unsatisfying in volume.



Rounding out the short expedition, we found abundant new starts of the invasive and ubiquitous oriental bittersweet. Its characteristic orange-colored roots can provide reassurance that you have indeed pulled up



a plant worthy of your distaste and of removal.

Please do remember that, no matter how tempting it may be to transplant one of these native plants into your little patch of paradise, these plants will remain healthier and live longer fruitful lives, if left alone where they originally were able to grow and flourish. Once purloined and planted in another place, they usually waste away in a season or two, at best. Enjoy them on your walks to the Greenbelt. And if you pine for them and still wish they graced your yard – just walk the green belt a little more often and remember that you share nature's garden with all the rest of us who cherish the plants of the greenbelt.