

# Wildflowers of the Cowiche Canyon

by Carol Barany

**M**y Garden “To Do” list is getting longer. Cutting back and dividing perennials, sowing seeds in trays on heat mats under grow lights, stressing over the health of my overwintered dahlia tubers, fixing a multitude of glitches in my irrigation system, and preparing for the Master Gardener Plant Sale is just the beginning.

Yet every spring, the hills of the Cowiche Canyon Conservancy are alive with an array of brilliantly blooming plant communities. More than 200 species in riparian and shrub-steppe ecosystems provide a glimpse of the sublime that changes, week-by-week, and without the help of a single gardener.

It was time to get out of my garden and “take a hike.”

The Uplands Trail off Scenic Drive is one of the most popular wildflower viewing sites in the state. In late March, the Sage Brush Violets were blooming. This diminutive is host to the Coronis Fritillary, a butterfly that starts and ends its life cycle in Conservancy habitat. Flying in from the mountains every September, female butterflies lay their eggs on puffs of dry violets; all that’s left of the now dormant plants. First-stage caterpillars overwinter there unfed, and awaken in the spring to feed on violet leaves. As butterflies, they’ll escape the heat by returning again to the mountains for the summer.

You’ll find Goldstars, Yellow Bells, Grass Widows, Foothills Onions, and Thyme-leaf Buckwheat. The Conservancy is well-known for supporting 12 different species of Lomatium, also known as ‘biscuit root’ or ‘desert parsley.’ Lomatium lithosolamans is a rare and endangered species found no where else on Earth than on a few lithosols in Yakima and Kittitas counties.

Lithosols are extremely thin soils consisting of partially weathered rock fragments and often found on steep slopes. While they have minimal water-holding ability, the best wildflower displays are often found on lithosols.

Don’t let those seemingly fragile, dainty blossoms fool you. They were produced by the very toughest of plants. Many are perennials that survive by compressing their growth and seed production into the few short months when the weather is mild and moisture is most available. Then they die back, leaving underground roots to rest until the cycle begins again next season. Some are annuals that grow from seed each year and completely die in summer, avoiding the dry season altogether.

On most of these plants, leaves are often small and covered with hairs, powders, waxes, or oils that slow water evaporation. Some flower species have deep roots to search the soil for moisture that can be stored in leaves and stems.

This is the shrub-steppe ecosystem that Yakima developed in. Shrubs, mainly in the form of sagebrushes and bitterbrushes, are found where the soil is relatively deep. At night, 6’ long taproots pull moisture up and distribute it to shallow branching roots near the

surface. Tiny hairs on the thick leaves of sagebrushes slow evaporation from heat and wind. Shrubs capture plant litter, which breaks down and adds to soil fertility, and provide shade for under-story plants.

Steppes are low-rainfall natural grasslands. Bunch grass grows in tufts or bunches from a single root, and you'll find it throughout the Conservancy. The foliage provides an 'umbrella' to shield the root system from sun and evaporation. Their funnel-like growth pattern directs precious rainfall into the center of the grass, where it's captured by the roots. The most typical species here is Bluebunch Wheatgrass. A 'cool season' perennial, its growth is mainly in spring and early summer, when soil moisture is available. Needle and Thread Grass and Indian Rice Grass grow in even drier soils. At higher elevations, look for Idaho fescue.

In the spaces between, you'll find the wildflowers. The extravaganza of bloom peaks in the spring, but continues into the fall, thanks to some late-blooming species.

Cryptobiotic soil crusts knit these diverse plant communities together. Composed of living organisms such as lichens, mosses, and algae, the crust captures nutrients and stabilizes the soil. This enables a host of plant species to grab hold, germinate, and get growing. Make sure you stay on the trail, since disturbances to the crust can create openings for invasive plant species.

In the weeks to come, the bloom of a succession of native wildflowers will greet Conservancy visitors. They'll find Buckwheats, Balsamroots, Phloxes, Lupines, Vetches, Penstemons, Lomatiums, Sages, Shooting Stars, Wallflowers, Blue Bells, Camas, Columbine, and Larkspur.

Forty miles of trails and a magnificent wildflower season are waiting for you just a short drive from town. All the information you need is found at [www.cowichecanyon.org](http://www.cowichecanyon.org). A hike at this special time of year is just what every weary gardener needs.