



Nature's Classroom of Amazing Plants

by Wendy Fachon

Outdoor walks provide tremendous real world learning opportunities for children and adults. Identifying which plants to avoid, as well as those with medicinal, healing properties, is something that even young children can learn to do.

Poison ivy: There is a well-known, easy-to-memorize rhyme of advice: Leaves of three, let it be. The three leaves found on poison ivy arrange themselves on each stem, and generally, poison ivy leaves are flame-shaped. They can be shiny or dull, green or red. When most people come into direct contact with poison ivy, they develop a bubbly skin rash that is extremely itchy and uncomfortable. It grows everywhere in Rhode Island, along the edges of fields, forests and sand dunes, and it is worth noting that the only mammals allergic to poison ivy are humans. It is as if the intolerable plant forms a line of defense to protect the rest of nature, sending a clear message to humans to be respectful of the natural environment.

Creeping vines of poison ivy can be downright sneaky when it comes to protecting nature, appearing as ground cover beneath a beautiful bed of wildflowers, or climbing up and completely concealing the trunk of a tree. In autumn, the leaves may become enticing colors of orange and yellow, and while most poison ivy leaves have pointed tips, some leaves have been known to take the form of hearts.

Jewelweed: People who are truly knowledgeable about wild plants will recognize jewelweed, the remedy to poison ivy rashes. It tends to grow right next to poison ivy, which seems a curious convenience provided by nature. The distinctive oval-toothed leaves repel rain, making the plant look as if it is covered with tiny jewels. Native Americans used the jewelweed plant as medicine for skin irritations, and herbalists use jewelweed to make soaps.

Jewelweed leaves and roots contain a chemical called lawsone, which has both anti-inflammatory and antihistamine properties. Other compounds, called balsaminones, have strong anti-itching properties. This combination of chemicals counteracts urushiol, the inflammatory chemical found in poison ivy. Sufferers can simply pick a stem and squeeze out the juice onto the affected skin, or crush the leaves to make a poultice. The leaves can also be brewed into a tea. Jewelweed is most easily identifiable from July through September, when it blooms with bright yellow to orange flowers that are horn-shaped and contain red spots.

Dandelion: A more recognizable common weed, the dandelion is yet another useful medicinal plant. The modern Latin or scientific name for dandelion is *Taraxacum officinale*, which refers to the plant's use as a healing herb. The genus name comes from the Greek "taraxos" (a disorder) and "akos" (a remedy). The species name, *officinale*, indicates it is the official species for use in medicine. The common name 'Dandelion' comes from the French "dent de lion", meaning lion's tooth, referring to the jagged leaves, which look like sharp teeth. Considered by some to be annoying and unwelcome, the tenacious and ubiquitous dandelion is actually edible, tasty and surprisingly nutritious.

Dandelions are a natural source of calcium, magnesium and phosphorus, and help promote strong bones and teeth. In addition, the leaves are a good source of protein (14 percent). The dandelion also offers a mouthful of unique nutrients that help maintain a strong liver and digestive system. Dandelion leaves can be mixed with salad greens, added to soup, or cooked lightly with olive oil and garlic. The flowers have a sweet flavor and can add color to any salad.

Money Plant: It's fun for children to find treasures from nature such as the coin-shaped seed pods of the money plant. When kids find them they feel like they have hit the jackpot. The seeds of the Money Plant (*Lunaria annua*), also known as moonwort, produce an oil containing unusual fatty acids that have been used to treat multiple sclerosis.

Exploring new as well as familiar landscapes can lead to the discovery of some new plant species, and teach children how to safely navigate their way with respect to nature.

Storywalker Wendy Fachon is a writer, an educator and the creator of Netwalking, in Rhode Island.. Learn more at Netwalking.com.

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