

Liking Lichen

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Each season has a plethora of riches for us to discover. We needn't travel any further than our own backyards, neighborhoods, and local parks and trails to notice the obvious to the "Wow, how did I miss that?" life all around us.

One remarkable thing that can be easily overlooked is lichen. And in winter, talk about the obviously not so obvious! Once the trees shed their leaves in the fall, lichen is difficult to miss. Moss and lichen often grow near each other; however, moss is a separate plant and lichen is a combination of fungus, green algae and/or cyanobacteria. Lichen is quite fascinating because they do not harm the trees (epiphytes), attract beneficial insects that feed birds, and provide food for animals such as deer and squirrels. In short, they are an important part of the life cycle. Lichen hitchhike, so to speak, and they come in many sizes, shapes, and colors.

I learned that the yellow and orange lichen is to be avoided because it is toxic, and that identifying lichen can be a challenge. But there are certain ones that are rather easy to identify, such as the Reindeer (think: antlers) and Witch's Hair (green strands waving in the breeze from branches). There is a wealth of information out there, and I recommend your State University Education/Extension sites.

There are three types of lichen: Foliose, Fruticose, and Crustose, and there is a site that shows the range of colors. The more I researched lichen, the more intrigued I became! Yet, as an artist, I admit my interest naturally wandered to "What are the possibilities visually?" Hence, my exploration into lichen prints.

For many years as a teacher, I used natural materials for my students to create interesting prints. From kelp to twigs and leaves to textures of bark and rocks. So, of course, I pondered lichen prints. First, it is important to point out that one must never tear lichen off a tree. There are plenty of twigs spirited off the trees by the wind with clumps of lichen available on the ground. And, please, only collect around your yard or neighborhood sidewalks. Second, I needed a non-toxic paint because the lichen needed to be returned to the ground where I found it, hopefully, not too damaged. If lichen were an endangered plant, I would of course, never recommend this process. You can visit my website, listed at the end of this article, to learn the details of how I made the prints.

Late fall, winter, and early spring are great times to observe the many kinds of lichen in your neighborhood as well as other places you might visit. Take your

family on a “lichen hunt” and note all the unique versions of lichen you can see as you walk. You can photograph your discoveries or bring along a sketchbook to draw samples that catch your attention. Most any trail will reveal lichen on branches in trees, atop fallen logs, and hitchhiking on twigs on the side of the path. Go to your local library to research lichen or peruse the internet, such as the sites listed below, to learn more. However, I warn you, the more you learn about lichen, the more you’ll want to know!

When spring begins to unfold, notice what happens to the lichen as leaves emerge from tree branches. Does it disappear? Since lichen depend on photosynthesis, how does it manage when the leaves block the sun? There are many questions you can write down to investigate.

During the dark season of rain and snow, there is so much subtle life happening as close as your nearest tree. It is always life affirming to notice that even during the cold winter months there are buds on bushes and trees curled up as if they are dreaming of the day when the light returns, and the warmth begins to thaw rigid branches into supple readiness.

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Go to the *Art and Nature* tab for links with information about lichen.

A version of this article first appeared in the March 2023 edition of the *Sherwood Gazette*.