

# Nebraska Geographic

with ALAN J. BARTELS

100ThingsSandhills@gmail.com



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There are more than 1,700 species of flowering plants native to the Cornhusker State. Find a comfortable chair and settle in for this exhaustive and detailed account of each species – just kidding!

I am not an expert when it comes to identifying the beautiful blooms conspicuously dotting Nebraska's natural lands spring, summer, and fall – not even close – but I am wild about wildflowers.

For someone who typically travels with a camera or two riding shotgun on my passenger seat, it is not uncommon for me to pull over safely onto the shoulder of the road, lay down in the ditch, and start shooting some random colorful blossom that catches my eye. Fortunately for us Nebraskans, when it comes to wildflowers, there is a diverse variety ranging from one end of the state to the other.

One of my favorites is the Shell Leaf Penstemon. This native perennial explodes with blooms ranging from pink to lavender in May and June. I often see it on sandy hillsides, and along Sandhills roads, where it stands up to three feet tall. Stop for a look and you'll see an amazing ballet of pollinators swarming around the plants, with others darting in and out of the blooms.

Nebraska is home to several other species of penstemon, and one that is particularly special. You aren't likely to see this one in large numbers from the road.

Out of the hundreds of species of penstemon around the world, only a handful give off a fragrance noticeable to humans. The Blowout Penstemon exudes a wonderful vanilla-like aroma when its fragile blooms emerge. It is a fleeting sensory adventure, with its bluish-to-purple blooms (rarely whitish or pink) in prime condition for barely a week, often less, depending on the wind.

Reduction of its habitat – blowouts in the Nebraska Sandhills – contributed to this flower being listed as federally endangered in 1987. Propagation of this species by man is its only hope for now. The largest known population of these plants on private land is near Burwell. It also is planted in some blowouts at the Nebraska National Forest near Halsey, Valentine National Wildlife Refuge in Cherry County, and on a few other private ranches and federal parcels. Remember, the Blowout Penstemon is a protected species. Take a sniff or two, but don't disturb the plant or take any seeds, leaves, blossoms, or any other part of the plant home with you.

Dame's Rocket appears as clusters of purplish or pinkish pinwheels, often seen on the roadside or other disturbed areas, and on the edges of shelterbelts. Often confused with native phlox, Dame's Rocket is an invasive species with four leaves

on its flowers. Phlox has five. Despite its attractiveness, Dame's Rocket can outcompete native plant species which are more important to pollinators.

Nebraska's wildflowers appear in a kaleidoscope of colors. When it comes to the yellow ones, they sometimes seem to arrive in towering waves.

Recent droughts have led to explosions of sunflowers in parts of Nebraska, and they are often among the first species to emerge after wildfires and controlled burns. When a big sunflower bloom blooms, photography social media sites overflow with beautiful images of the sun setting over rolling landscapes blanketed with the sunny flowers. There are nearly 70 species of sunflowers in the United States, and nine native sunflower species in Nebraska, but there are also lookalikes.

Compass plant and cup plant each resemble sunflowers, at least to me when speeding by at 65 mph or while hiking through undulating prairie hills. Both can grow several feet tall and each one is ostentatious with showy blooms. There are other Nebraska wildflowers that look like sunflowers. There are differences, but I am not a botanist. To me, they simply add variety and beauty to my photographic excursions, regardless of their taxonomy.

There is another flower that I want to touch on. Most of us likely know the goldenrod as Nebraska's state flower. But do you know which one? There are more than 100 species. Sixteen are known to be native to Nebraska. According to the Nebraska Secretary of State's office, which provides information about Nebraska's state symbols, the scientific name of our state flower is *Solidago serotina*, or the Giant Goldenrod.

Our state flower gets a lot of undeserved attention from allergy sufferers who blame it for their annual bout with Hay Fever. The truth is, Ragweed releases its irritating pollen at about the same time but is far less showy than the attention-grabbing goldenrod. So much for state pride, right?

I could go on and on and on about Nebraska wildflowers and places to see them. Rather than bore you with that, I hope you'll simply hit the road to our state parks, wildlife management areas, and other public areas, or get permission from landowners, and do some exploring on your own. After all, there are wildflowers in parts of Nebraska that you won't see in others.

You don't have to be able to identify each species, or any. All you need is a sense of adventure and an appreciation for the mosaic of fragile hues that appears across the prairie quilt of Nebraska once winter's grasp has been vanquished into distant memory.

Safe travels – and watch for deer.