

Get Wild: Joys, histories and mysteries of spring flowers

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Karn Stiegelmeier
Get Wild

We have been fortunate to receive significant snowfall in late May, giving us surprise skiing and badly needed moisture. Green leaves have exploded and south-facing and lower elevation trails have erupted with early flower treats. Pasqueflowers, buttercups, phlox, as well as chiming bells and larkspur, arrowleaf balsamroot and serviceberries, have been happily blooming. Look closely near your feet to find some surprises. Try to stay on the trail to avoid damaging fragile plant and fungal life. This time of year, many of our trails are still muddy or snow-covered, and traveling through them can be damaging. Choose those drier, lower-elevation and south-facing trails in early June. You will avoid damaging trails and plants, and will be able to see more early bloomers.



Mountain ball cacti can be found in drier south-facing areas.

Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo

Mountain ball cactus

One of the most exciting blooms for me this early June is found on drier, south-facing, sagebrush territory. I have had the pleasure of seeing one or two every year. This year, I counted over 25 blooming mountain ball cacti (*Pediocactus simpsonii*) in one location. This adorable cactus is easily overlooked because these perfectly round balls blend in with their surroundings even in these relatively open places. The ball is mostly underground with a small part above. The pinkish or yellowish flowers cover much of the ball just an inch above ground.



While it hasn't been evaluated by the FDA, valerian has been used medicinally for thousands of years.
Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo

Valerian

A fascinating early blooming and common native white flower is the valerian. Valerian has been used for centuries by people all over the world. Valerian root was used extensively in ancient Greece and Rome medicinally. Hippocrates described its calming, relaxing, and sleep-inducing properties. It is still commonly used in Europe, but has not been evaluated for use in the U.S. by the Food and Drug Administration. You can buy valerian in stores most commonly in the form of an herbal tea. The name valerian is derived from the Latin verb *valere* (to be strong, healthy). *Valeriana occidentalis* is the commonly used valerian for medicinal uses as a relaxant and sleep enhancer. *Valeriana acutiloba* is the valerian growing here in abundance this time of year in meadows.



Scarlet gilia is a favorite for hummingbirds.
Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo

Scarlet gilia

The Scarlet gilia, *ipomopsis aggregate* is often called fairy trumpet or scarlet skyrocket for its long trumpet-shaped flower. It blooms every year as the hungry hummingbirds arrive to their summer mountain homes. Scarlet gilia is the perfect hummingbird nectar flower with long slender flowers only a hummingbird bill, or moths with a long proboscis, can manage to sip nectar from. The scarlet gilia grows throughout the West. I think ours are the prettiest, but they can grow up to 5 feet tall in Texas!



Local Indigenous people have a wide variety of uses for different parts of western stoneseed.
Karn Stiegelmeier/Courtesy photo

Western stoneseed

This yellow flowering plant is blooming in Summit at lower elevations today. Western stoneseed (*lithospermum ruderale*) has an intriguing history of medicinal, food and other uses. The seed has been used for food for centuries by Native Americans. The root was used by Native women as a contraceptive, ending the menstrual cycle. Recent studies on mice have shown that it works to reduce or eliminate fertility. The roots were used as a dye for clothing, baskets or dyeing the seeds red to be used as red beads. Another common name for this plant is puccoon, that refers to several related plants, all used by Native Americans for red dyes.

Various expert authors of wildflower guides give differing common and Latin names for our flowers, creating some confusion, and some interesting history. So, enjoy our beautiful spring flowers with any name you choose.



"Get Wild" publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Karn Stiegelmeier is a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.
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