

Get Wild: Identifying gigantic wildflowers

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Frank Gutmann
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Veratrum californicum, otherwise known as false hellebore or corn lily among other names.

Photo from Frank Gutmann

Among the many joys of visiting or living in Summit County is appreciating the plethora of wildflowers that bloom in May through August, especially after adequate precipitation, as is the case this year.

Two prominent, marvelous and gigantic wildflowers in the wild are the green gentian, otherwise known as monument plant, and the corn lily, otherwise known as skunk cabbage or cow cabbage. The two can easily be confused by a novice. According to the “Rocky Mountain Wildflowers” pocket guide by David Dahms, which is available for sale at the Dillon Ranger District ranger station in Silverthorne, “Green Gentian (has) numerous intricate flowers (that) cover the tall erect stem.” The guide continues to say that the flowers have four greenish-white petals with purple specks that are backed by four pointed sepals.

The wildflowers usually grow to between 2 and 7 feet and feature leaves with long and narrow whorls. But the flower can grow to a gigantic 10 feet tall.



Frank Gutmann stands beside a green gentian, otherwise known as a monument plant.


Photo from Frank Gutmann



The flowers typically grow between July and August in foothills and subalpine terrain, usually in open meadows and forest clearings, according to Dahm's guide.

The guide reads, “This plant lives many years without blooming as a flat rosette of leaves. In its last year, it sends up its main stem and blooms.”

By comparison, *Veratrum californicum* — also known as false hellebore, corn lily or cow cabbage among other names — grows well in moist areas but also in meadows and hillsides at elevations between 5,000 and 13,000 feet. It has leaves that measure 8-12 inches long and 6 inches broad. The lateral leaf veins notably all join at the base of the central vein, or midrib, whereas the lateral veins of the green gentian join all along the length of the midrib.

Cream colored flowers grow in clusters at the top of a single, unbranched stalk in a way that resembles corn, and it can reach 6-7 feet tall. Of special interest, as is the case for many other wildflowers, trees and bushes, corn lily causes severe poisoning in cattle, goats and sheep. For more details, visit the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s [research service website](#).

It’s fun to compare wildflowers, even if some of the technical botanical identification minutia are boring. Recognizing and recalling wildflower names can get under my skin. I prefer the grandeur of the monument plant over skunk cabbage by appearance and name. What’s your preference?

Frank Gutmann

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frank Gutmann is a board member with the 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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