

TORONTO WILDFLOWERS: JUNE-BLOOMING SAVANNA SPECIES

The largest remnant of black oak savanna in Toronto is in High Park. A small area is preserved in the northern part of Lambton Park (east of the Humber, north of Dundas). These savanna remnants have locally rare plant species, including the three discussed, found only in them or confined to them and a few similar environments.

Wild lupin (*Lupinus perennis*) is our only native local species of the over 150 lupin species in North America. Lupins belong to the Leguminosae, the widespread pea or bean family, the third largest plant family with over 20,000 species. Lupin, a Middle English word, is probably from the Latin *lupinus*. The name comes from a superstition that lupins depleted or “wolfed” the soil. Lupins in fact increase soil fertility. They have a symbiotic relationship with nitrogen-fixing bacteria (*Rhizobium* species) that live in nodules in their roots. The bacteria manufacture nitrogen compounds used by the plant, and the plant supplies carbohydrates and other food materials to the bacteria. *L. perennis* is perennial, hence the name. Its range is mainly south of Canada, from Maine to Florida and west to Minnesota and Illinois. In Toronto, *L. perennis* is probably confined to High and Lambton Parks although the TFN’s *Vascular Plants of Metropolitan Toronto* recorded a questionable occurrence in the Rouge Valley. Although considered locally rare, it can be abundant in early June in open savanna in High Park.

Rockrose (*Helianthemum canadense*) is one of about 15 North American species of this genus. Europe has 80 species, mainly near the Mediterranean Basin. *Helianthemum* comes from the Greek *helios* (sun) and *anthemum* (flower). It refers to the bright yellow colour of many *Helianthemum*



flowers. Rockroses - the common name comes from having a rose-like flower - belong to the Cistaceae (rock-rose family). Cistaceae is from the Latin *cistus* or Greek *kistos*, names given to Mediterranean species. This may come from the Greek *kiste* (box) referring to the capsule-like fruit. *H. canadense* ranges from southern Ontario and southwest Quebec to and south of Wisconsin, Maine, and Nova Scotia. It has 2 - 3 cm yellow flowers in late June in Toronto. Flowers only open in sunlight and last a single day. Later it produces numerous small flowers that lack petals. I’ve seen it in High Park in open areas near the Black Oak Trail. The TFN also reported it in Lambton Prairie (Lambton Park).

New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus americanus*) belongs to the buckthorn family (Rhamnaceae). *Ceanothus* comes from the Greek for “spiny plant”. New Jersey tea is so-called because its leaves were substituted for black tea during the American Revolution. It occurs in southern parts of eastern Canada and throughout the eastern U.S. *C. americanus*, like *L. perennis*, is a nitrogen-fixing plant. This low shrub, 3 m or less high, has dense rounded panicles of white flowers in leaf axils. The petals are slender tubes terminating in folded calyxes. It occurs in High, Lambton, and Sunnybrook Parks and the Rouge Valley. It starts blooming in Toronto in late June.

The best odds of seeing these locally rare species come from visiting High Park several times between early June and early July. Breezy days on the savanna should keep the mosquitoes away!

Peter Money

Top to bottom: lupin plant and close up of flower cluster; rockrose flower; New Jersey tea flower cluster. Photos: Peter Money