

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS



## **Spring Prizes**

*It's a good time to get out on the trails and cherish the signs of spring*

## J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

One of my co-workers and I went on a social distancing hike to try to create a virtual experience for CU members. Our plan was to walk Millville's Bicycle and Walking Trail and make a short film to entice others to go hiking using our trail guide and thus get a mental health boost. As is always the case when I go on the trail I have some extraordinary experiences. We came across some other members who had just seen a huge otter, and we too got a few great glimpses as he lifted his head high in the water, apparently equally curious about us. Ospreys and eagles gave us some aerial acrobatics to enjoy. About 50 red-bellied turtles lined the bank. After a winter of being buried in the muddy bottom of the Maurice River their helmeted carapaces were a dusty army brown as they basked on the far shore.

But the hit for me was an old standby, a harbinger of spring: the blooming of the golden-club. You know when you need an old friend to just anchor you? Someone who is reliable. Someone you connect with and who offers meaning when you encounter each other. A mail person who has delivered your mail for 10 plus years, the friend that never forgets your birthday? For me golden-club just reaffirms that spring has come to the doorstep again. It doesn't have the antics of the otter, nor the gumdrop nose, nor the playful tease of "Now you see me, now you don't," but it has its own special attributes. And being a perennial you can count on it.



Golden-club. Photo credit Dave Pape (flickr) creative commons.org/licenses/by/2.0legalcode

This plant is native to the eastern coastal United States from Massachusetts south to Florida and gulfward to Texas. Limited to the inland states of Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and New York, it grows in tidal marshes like those along the River trail, but also in sphagnum- dominated bogs.

The golden-club (*orontium aquaticum*) is a monocotyledon having a single seed leaf. Its minute yellow flowers are arranged around a fleshy axis called a spadix. The arrangement of the flowers on a plant is its inflorescence. These yellow spears rise rather erectly from a base of green leaves. The leaves can be immersed or else can float on the water's surface. They are oval and pointed and repel water, thus earning them another common name -never-wets.

On dark tannin waters they look like very thin waxy candles with a yellow tip atop a white portion above the green leaves. They are one of first tiny but showy plants in local acidic wetlands to bloom in the spring. They grow from rhizomes or a horizontal underground stem that drops its roots at intervals. Changes in acidity, like those caused by fertilizer runoff, could have serious adverse effects.

Witmer Stone (1866-1939,) who worked at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, was considered one of the last "great naturalists." A number of scientists who documented the natural wonders in North American earned this title. Stone was extraordinary with an interest in ornithology, botany, and mammalogy. He worked at the Academy for 50 years and served as its director; his

books are often quoted. He had a particular interest in Southern NJ and especially in its Pinelands plants. He evidently fancied orontium, describing it as "...one of the attractions of the NJ Pine Barrens in springtime, when the surface of the pools bristle with its brilliant, slender, orange-yellow spikes bordered below with white where they join the green stalks..."

The genus orontium has no other living species except golden-club, but fossilized records show it had relatives at one time. Dr. Larry Klotz of Shippensburg University suggests it is most closely related to skunk cabbage. Today Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island all classify it with varying degrees of rarity from special concern to endangered.

Some sources discuss American Indians eating the plant after it is dried. The stalk can be made into a flour. Other parts of the plant are edible with proper preparation and many boilings. The North Carolina extension service suggests that the plant has a some mildly poisonous characteristics. In U.P. Hedrick's *Sturtevant's Edible Plants of the World* he describes it as containing calcium oxalate that, when eaten raw, gives you the sensation of being pricked by "hundreds of small needles." It goes on to say how to prepare it, but frankly I'm still caught up on the "sensation of needles" part.

I've not seen the prolific stands that are described in some literature and it is clearly a rarity in a number of states. So I strongly suggest leaving it where it is; in fact in some regions it's surely illegal to harvest it. Most natural areas prohibit harvest of flora in any case. There

are online nurseries that propagate and sell this species, if you have a wetland section in your garden where you would like to try it out.

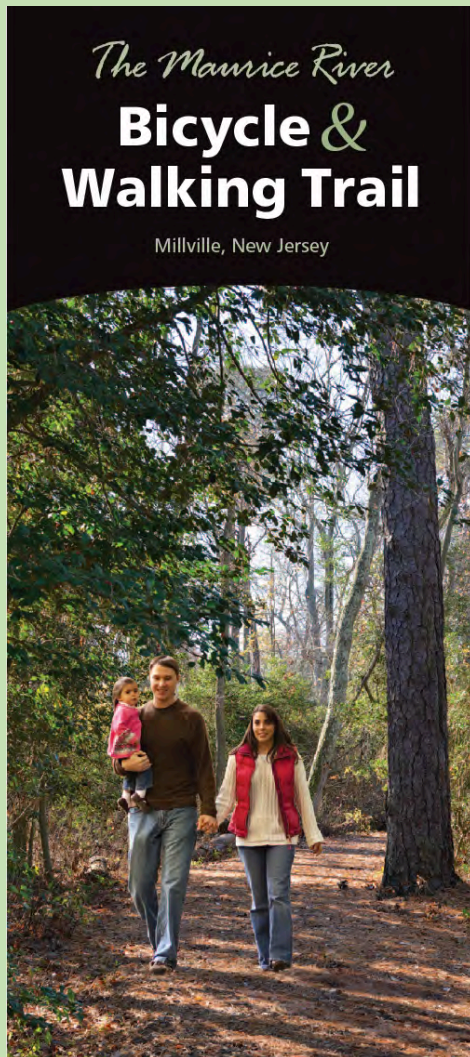
On the walk we got an eye full of spring and an otter sighting to boot; it doesn't get much better than that. Hope to see you from six or more feet away on the trail, at least for now.

Sources: Larry H. Klotz, 1992 prof. Dept. of Biology, Shippensburg University.  
USDA Plants Database.

*Scroll down for extras*

## EXTRAS

To view the video taken on this walk [click here](#)



CU Maurice River offers a detailed guide to the Maurice River Bicycle and Walking Trail. It includes a map, local history, habitat types, and features some of the animals often seen there. If you would like a copy you can pick it up at Millville City Hall's drive up window off the Dock Street parking area. Or you may email CU at [meghan.thompson@cumauriceriver.org](mailto:meghan.thompson@cumauriceriver.org) and we will mail you a copy.