

## Enchantment Along The Trails – And In Books About Wild Cape Cod

by **Kaimi Rose Lum**

This is the time of year when my husband looks like he's standing in the kitchen but he's out to sea, brooding over the winds and tides and trying to predict where the tuna will be. And it's the time of year when I may look like I'm sitting at my desk but I'm wandering – struck by a vivid daydream – in the dunes of the back shore. Pardon the sand in my brain.

The sun is sharp, the air cool, and a tiny house waits at the end of a long soft road that winds over steep hills and down into scrub-pine thickets. Along the trail, sickle-leaved golden asters are blooming, and the tight clusters of green buds on the goldenrod have fluffed out into clumps of yellow flowers. I learned from a book in our collection, "A Vanishing Heritage: Wildflowers of Cape Cod" by Mario DiGregorio and Jeff Wallner that goldenrod's Latin name, *Solidago sempervirens*, means "evergreen healing plant" and that it's wrongly blamed for allergies caused by ragweed. Cultures other than ours respect it enough to wax poetic about it, the book says. The English "take note of the melancholy in goldenrod yellow and call the plant 'farewell summer.'"

In a boggy hollow bristling with cranberry and bayberry shrubs, I'm careful not to trample my favorite little plants, the ones my children call "lollipops." They're a minuscule lichen, barely two inches high, with crimson caps perched on upright stems. Only recently I discovered, in "Common Trailside Plants of Cape Cod National Seashore" by Mike Whatley, that their proper name is "red-tufted British soldiers." I also learned, in the lichens section of Loren Petry and Marcia Norman's classic "Beachcomber's Botany," that the wonderfully primeval-looking, sea-foam-colored crust carpeting the ground in low spots is known as "reindeer moss."

A bend in the sandy road is flanked by poverty grass, or beach heather, a mounding evergreen shrub tipped with yellow blossoms in early summer. In the fall its colors dull to grayish brown and the rounded forms of the individual plants gain a quivery, prickly look, inspiring my children to refer to this part of the route as "Hedgehog Lane." Heathers, hedge-

hogs, what have you. There are the names we give things and then there are the official names in the books; in this case, creative license is used for both, as the plant is not really a grass and, according to Beth Schwarzmann in "The Nature of Cape Cod," not a heather either. Whatley, in "Common

Trailside Plants," says that when Thoreau visited the Cape in the 1850s, "he implied that poverty grass was aptly named, because it described the barrenness of the Outer Cape's landscape."

My younger daughter leaked beach plums from her pockets on our way home from the dunes a few weekends ago. That was the day we stocked up on the luscious purple fruit, hanging in clusters under leaves that have since turned rosier. My plums are in the freezer, waiting to be cooked and jellied, but my mom has already churned out a dozen jars, using a recipe from her old, worn copy of "Plum Crazy: A Book About Beach Plums" by Elizabeth Post Mirel. Snow Library owns the book, which includes quaint illustrations by Betty Fraser and includes notes on the botany and natural history of "Prunus maritima."

There are still one or two salt-spray roses in bloom around the shack at the end of that soft sand road. Mostly the bushes are laden with plump orange-red hips, good for making tea and jam – work that can wait. It's time to open the shutters, shoo the mouse out from behind the storm door (for a good story about the critters of the back dunes, see the children's book "Victor" by Julia Whorf Kelly) and get out Henry Beston's "The Outermost House." Whenever I read it, I'm reminded that we wouldn't have any of this – this Cape Cod National Seashore, these quiet paths, these flowers – if it weren't for Beston's tender, immersive chronicle of a year spent on Eastham's outer beach. It inspired the Seashore's founding. "For the gifts of life are the earth's, and they are given to all," Beston writes.

Happy trails, and happy reading, from Snow Library.

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