

# A Brief Guide to the Wildflowers of the Gowanus

*with the names, haunts, and habits of  
the most common, and notes on their  
culinary and medicinal use*

James Walsh

The banks of the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn are home to an unexpectedly rich and varied population of wildflowers. Perhaps, being wild themselves, they are attracted to the wildness and neglect of this area, with its characteristic mingling of industry, post-industrial ruin, and a scattering of housing, all set around a wild though polluted waterway. The area's vacant lots are not vacant at all, being covered in all manner of flowering plants poking up through the debris. Some are indigenous and have lived here since the end of the most recent Ice Age. Others came with European settlement or have arrived more recently from other parts of the world. In this respect, the banks of the Gowanus are a mirror of our teeming city, and indeed of the nation itself.

But putting poetry and patriotism aside, this pamphlet is intended as a practical field guide. My hope is that, guide in hand, you will explore the neighborhood and discover the plants for yourself. I've focused on the most common plants, so you will find them in your neighborhood too, no matter where you live. If you are adventurous, or simply enjoy being a little confused, you don't have to come to the Gowanus at all, but can, instead, simply plot the map of this walk onto any other map and, following the directions and descriptions, see what you find. Or you can walk around with it along the banks of the Gowanus, as intended.

One very important point before we begin. Plants have long been valued for their usefulness as food and medicine. I'm interested in this topic and have included brief notes on how some of these plants can or have been used. Don't do it. Everything growing here is too toxic to be consumed. Trust me on this. Under no circumstances should anything you find be used as food or medicine. So when I say that something may be cooked as spinach or nibbled as a condiment, don't actually do it. But feel free to *think* about doing it, as if we lived in a world that is better than it presently is.



Wild Madder

The Gowanus Canal can be easily reached by subway. It is close to the Smith/9th St. and Carroll St. stops on the F and G, and the Union St. and Fourth Ave./9th St. stops on the N/R.

The Smith/9th St. station is the most elevated, and one of the most antiquated, in the MTA system, and it is there that we will begin. From the Coney Island-bound side you can see the lower portion of the Gowanus Canal, where it enters Gowanus Bay, and from the Manhattan-bound side you can see most of the upper portion of the canal, where we will be walking.

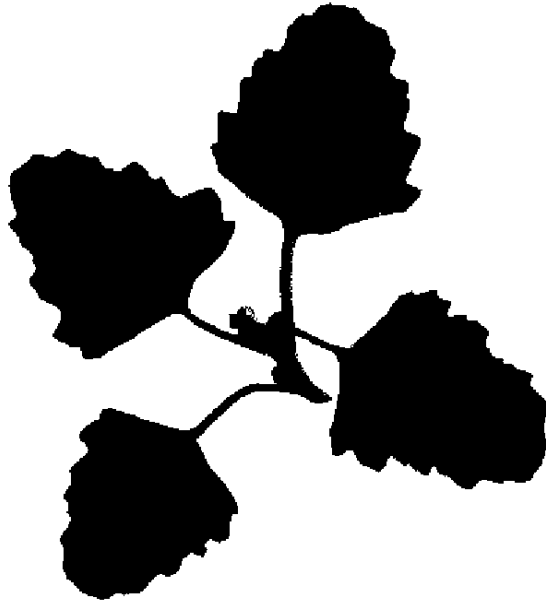
Descending to street level, turn right on 9th St., right on Smith St., and right again on Huntington St., which dead-ends on the canal. Much of the flora of the Gowanus is concentrated in cul-de-sacs such as this. Walking down the street, on your right you will see Shepherd's Purse, Common Groundsel, Chickweed, Smartweed, Dandelion, and American and English Plantain. Along the wall, and at the end of the street, and everywhere on this walk, you will see the ubiquitous Mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*, which can be used as an aromatic and bitter condiment and is related to the Wormwood used to make the mildly-narcotic drink absinthe. Its leaves and root are used in herbal medicine and, according to one authority, "it was believed to preserve the wayfarer from fatigue, sunstroke, wild beasts and evil spirits generally." Further along, growing at the base of a wall, is Common Mullein, *Verbascum thapsus*, with a mass of wide, downy leaves and, late in the summer, a tall spike with yellow flowers. There is another at the edge of the canal, perched among the rubble.



Mugwort  
*Artemisia vulgaris*

Returning to Smith St., turn right. In the middle of the block, growing up the chain link fence, you will see Bindweed, a relative of the Morning Glory, with leaves shaped like blunt arrowheads and pink and white trumpet-shaped flowers.

Turn right at the corner and walk down 5th St. For the adventurous, about 50 ft. down on the right you can slip through a gap in the gate into a large field that is a veritable garden of Gowanus flora. Besides all the common flowers, there are some rarer sorts, like False Foxglove, Wild Madder, Common Milkweed, Yellow Sweet-Clover, and White Champion, mostly concentrated in a band bordering Smith St. Continuing down 5th St., follow the street around to the left, and at the next corner on the right, growing at the base of a brick wall, you will see Lamb's Quarters, *Chenopodium album*, with serrated triangular leaves with white undersides. It is a member of the Goosefoot family, along with beets and spinach, and the leaves can be used in salad or cooked like spinach.



Lamb's Quarters

Turn right down 4th St. Both sides of the street are home to a number of flowering plants, including Fleabane and Evening Primrose. Halfway down on the left, against a brick wall, are a colony of Sow Thistle, which look like sturdy, prickly, many-headed Dandelions, with dense yellow flowers and clasping leaves that wrap around the stem.

At the end of the street turn right to a cul-de-sac with a panoramic view of the canal. Along the wall on the right, between the Lamb's Quarters, you can find the sprightly and highly-variable Shepherd's Purse, *Capsella bursa-pastoris*, with small white flowers and triangular seeds on a tall stem. Its stem and seeds seem to have inspired its Irish name of *Clappedepouch*, "given in allusion to the begging of lepers, who stood at crossroads with a bell or clapper, receiving their alms in a cup at the end of a long pole." Mrs. Dana said of this plant "This is one of the commonest of our wayside weeds, working its way everywhere with such persistency and appropriating other people's property so shamelessly, that it has won for itself the nickname of pickpocket." The leaves at the base of the plant, when young, can be eaten as a salad, with a sharp bite like Arugula, and the larger leaves can be boiled like spinach.

Other edible greens in this cul-de-sac include Bitter Dock and Curly Dock, both of which are tough, erect plants with long, pointy leaves. Their flowers are the food of the caterpillar of the Bronze Copper butterfly. Both species have numerous medicinal uses, and Mrs. Grieve says of Bitter Dock "The leaves are often applied as a rustic remedy for burns and scalds and used for dressing blisters, serving also as a popular cure for Nettle stings."



Shepherd's Purse



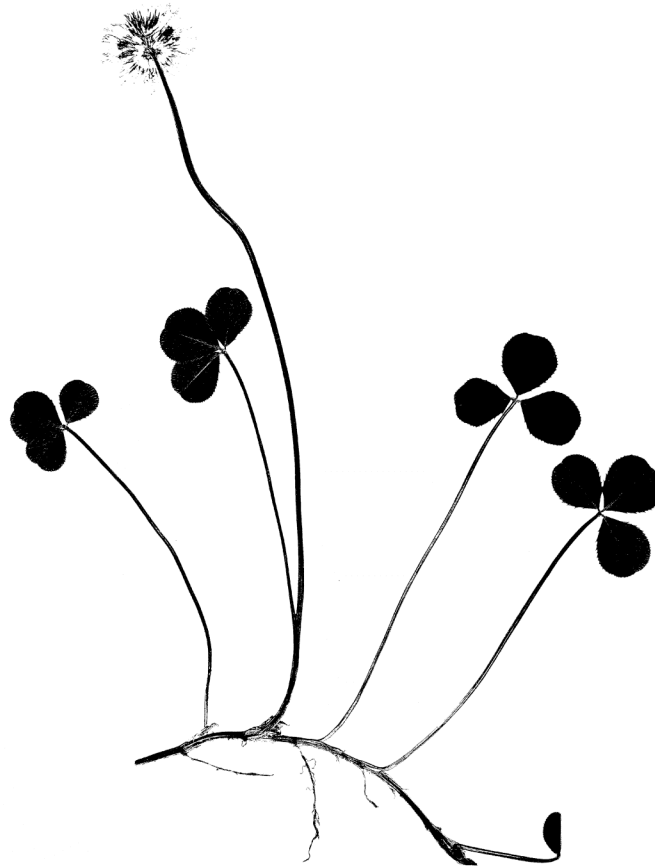
Head away from the canal, turn right on 3rd St., and cross to the other side just before the bridge, where you will find a patch of greenery and litter. Look for Red Clover, Chickweed, English Plantain, Fleabane, Queen Anne's Lace, and Shepherd's Purse.

Cross the bridge and just past the chain link fence there is a small area with a variety of plants, including Storksbill, *Erodium cicutarium*, a small, low-lying plant with finely-branched leaves, like the carrot plant, and delicate purplish-pink flowers. After the flower is fertilized it grows into a long point that resembles the bill of a stork.

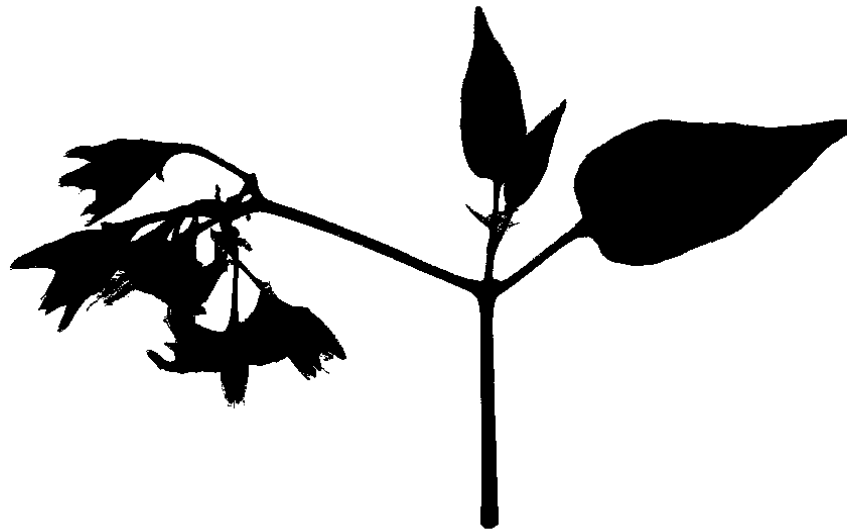


Storksbill

Head back the way you came. For the adventurous, you can jump down to the right and botanize along the canal. If you climb the wall at the end you will emerge next to a defunct subway power station, with a flower-filled lane to the right. Continuing across the bridge, turn right on Bond St., then right again on 2nd St. The right side of the street has many plants, including White Clover and Chickweed. At the end of the street is a pleasant spot to sit. This is the only place on the canal where you have direct access to the water. The concrete planters here have a number of wild plants, such as Dead-Nettle and Common Vetch.



White Clover



Bittersweet Nightshade  
*Solanum dulcamara*

Returning to Bond St., go right and then right again down 1st St. to the canal. In the far right corner, along a metal fence, look for Bittersweet Nightshade, *Solanum dulcamara*, with pointy leaves and clusters of purple flowers and red berries. This plant is related to the Potato, Tomato, Tobacco, and Eggplant, as well as the aptly-named Deadly Nightshade. Experts are unsure if it is poisonous. Thoreau said "No berries that I am acquainted with are so agreeably arrayed, somewhat hexagonally, like a small wasp nest. . . . They hang more gracefully over the river's brim than any pendant in a lady's ear. Yet they are considered poisonous. Not to look at, surely."

Start back toward Bond, and on your right, in the corner of some grey concrete steps, look for a clump of Dooryard Knotweed, *Polygonum arenastrum*, a low, spreading plant with small greyish-green leaves and tiny white flowers with yellow centers. Halfway up the street, on the right, there is a colony of White Clover, and behind it some Common Yellow Wood-Sorrel, with flowers like small buttercups.

At Bond St., go right one block and then right again to the beautiful and historic Carroll St. Bridge, one of the few remaining retractable bridges in America. As you walk back to Bond, notice on the right side, by a fire hydrant, a clump of Black Medick, *Medicago lupulina*, with clover-like leaves and small yellow flowers that bloom from Spring through Fall. A little further along, against a brick wall, is another colony of Sow-Thistle.



Black Medick



### Rough-Fruited Cinquefoil

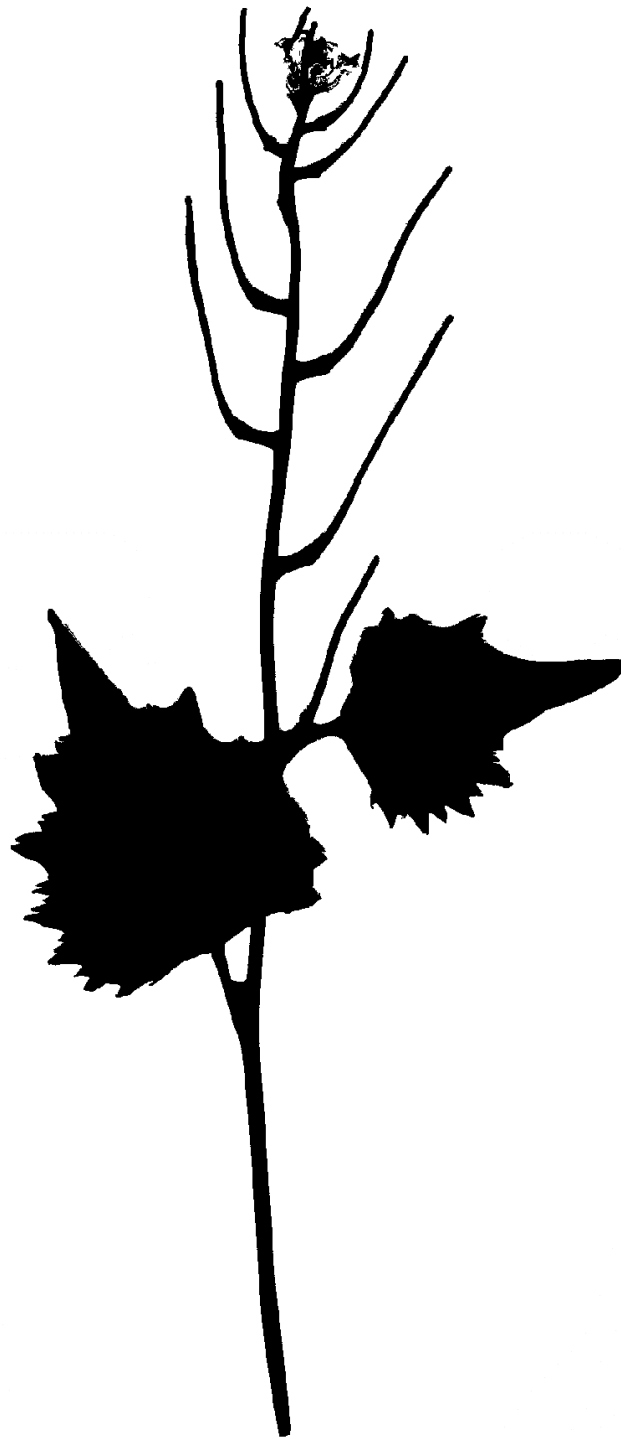
At Bond, go right one block, cross and turn right down Union St. to the bridge, where you can look down the canal to its end. On your left, the hill covering the oil tanks supports a lot of wild flowers, including Rough-fruited Cinquefoil, *Potentilla recta*, with yellow flowers and five-fingered leaves that bear a striking resemblance to the genus *Cannabis*. Look for it also between the sidewalk and the street.

Return to Bond, turn right and then right again on Sackett St. The left side has a lot of plants, including Black Medick, Shepherd's Purse, English Plantain, White Clover, and Common Yellow Wood-Sorrel.

Return to Bond, turn right and then right again on DeGraw St. Immediately on your right, at the base of a brick wall, is a colony of Common Groundsel, *Senecio vulgaris*, with tough, crinkly leaves and many yellow flowers like closed-up Dandelions. In her popular herbal, Mrs. Grieve says "The name Groundsel is of old origin, being derived from the Anglo-Saxon *grundeswelge*, meaning literally, 'ground swallower,' referring to the rapid way the weed spreads." Its Latin name is from *senex*, an old man, in allusion to its grey, dried-up flowerheads. Commenting on its gregarious habits, Mrs. Grieve says "Groundsel is one of those plants which follows civilized man wherever he settles, for there is hardly a European colony in the world in which it does not spring up upon the newly tilled land, the seeds probably having mingled with the grain which the European takes with him to the foreign country." It was formerly used in place of hops in the brewing of beer.



Common Groundsel



Garlic Mustard

Further along, between the sidewalk and the street, is a tall yellow-flowered plant in the Mustard family, which I haven't been able to positively identify. The flowerbeds at the end of the street have a variety of cultivated and wild plants all mixed together. In the middle of the bed is Garlic-Mustard, *Alliaria officinalis*, with pointy, triangular leaves, spikes on the stem, and small white flowers. The leaves have a definite garlic smell and taste on top of their mustard sharpness. "The poor people in the country," an eighteenth-century English writer observed, "eat the leaves of this plant with their bread, and on account of the relish they give, call them *Sauce-alone*." Fernald laconically noted "It is available for those who like the combination."



And that is the end of this botanical tour of the banks of the Gowanus Canal. I hope you have been both edified and entertained along this walk, and that you return, perhaps in another season, to visit your new acquaintances, the wildflowers of the Gowanus.

The nearest subway is the F and G at Carroll St., a short walk uphill through the cultivated environs of Carroll Gardens.



## For Further Reading

My favorite local field guide is *Wildflowers in the Field and Forest: A Field Guide to the Northeastern United States* by Steven Clemants and Carol Gracie, which has very clear photographs and descriptions. For edible plants and their history, I like *Edible Wild Plants of Eastern North America* (1958) by Merritt Lyndon Fernald and Alfred Charles Kinsey, which is out of print but findable at a reasonable price. Another detailed and beautifully-written resource is *A Modern Herbal* (1931, republished 1992) by Mrs. M. Grieve. For pleasant and informative reading about plants, no one has surpassed *How to Know the Wildflowers* (1893, reprinted by Dover) by Mrs. William Starr Dana.

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