The Writings of Eloise Butler

Virgin Minnesota Prairie in Full Bloom Surpasses Flora of Tropics; Earth's Tapestry Shows a Riot of Color before Autumnal Frosts. - Sept. 03, 1911

Virgin Minnesota prairie at the height of its bloom surpasses the far-famed flora of the tropics in brilliancy of coloring. Here all shades of red, blue and gold are intricately interwoven in earth's tapestry before it is destroyed by autumnal frosts and replaced by Winter's carpet of snow. Prominent in the riot of color and beauty of design are the *liatras* or blazing stars, with their flower heads loosely arranged in slender wands, or in splendid, compact spikes, sometimes over a foot in length. The flowers might be mistaken for thistles, but they have no stabbing prickles. Other popular names, as gay feather and button snakeroot, show the esteem in which the plants are held.

Prairie Blazing Star, *Liatris pycnostachya*

Minnesota has six species of *liatras,* (Ref. #1) and three of them - L. *Pycnostachya, cylindracea* and *scariosa* have been introduced into the wild garden (Ref. #2). *L. pycnostachya* has gone by, but the other two species are in full bloom. They are easy to cultivate on account of their thick, bulbous rootstalks.

Curlycup Gumweed, *Grindelia squarrosa*

Not many years ago the gum plant, *Grindelia squarrosa,* (Ref. #3) was not to be found within the limits of Minneapolis. It is common on the great plains, and it has spread from the western part of the state until it is now a common weed by sandy roadsides and in vacant lots, and one against which our gardeners and farmers wage battle. Nevertheless, it is an attractive plant with its profuse, pure yellow flower heads resembling sunflowers and its lettuce-green leaves.

We are glad, moreover, to learn that it is of some use, as a specific for ivy poisoning. But why is it named gum plant? Not that it furnishes a delectable wad for the ruminating folk, but because under the flower clusters a mass of sticky, resinous matter is exuded to keep out from the blossoms the crawling insect tribes that are unable to do the work of pollination. It is unnecessary to glue the flower heads to the herbarium sheets, for they provide their own mucilage.

***Helenium autumnale* is a glorious**, late composite in rich, low land. From now on it will unfold its golden disks as long as any flower endures. It blossoms freely and often attains a height of six feet. The soft yellow ray petals are divided like those of coreopsis and surround a convex disk. The leaves are pale green, just the right shade to harmonize with the flowers. They run down on the angles of the stem, making narrow, winglike projections. If the leaves are dried and pulverized they make a

titillating powder as efficacious as snuff for those who enjoy sneezing, hence its common name, sneezeweed. (Ref. #4)

Common Sneezeweed, *Helenium autumnale*

Florists cultivate the plant and have produced from it varieties. It is excellent for formal gardens on account of its height, refined color and its late, profuse blooms. It never fails to respond under transplanting. A colony of sneezeweed in the wild garden of two successive seasons which was lifted when in full bloom has repaid the labor by continuing to bloom at its appointed time.

Great Blue Lobelia, *Lobelia siphilitica* showing the closed stamen ring at the pistil.

High above the lovely Grass of Parnassus (Ref. #5) rise the spikes of tall lobelia (Ref #6) in such opulence that the meadows appear to be gemmed with lapis lazuli rimmed with goldenrod.

The tubular portion of lobelia flowers is split down to the base for the convenience of the nectar-seeking insects, and the stamens, five in number, are united in a closed ring around the pistil so that, to the novice, stamens and pistil seem to be a single body. The lobelias may be recognized, whatever their size or color, by these peculiarities.

A certain botanist arriving at a house where he was expected as a guest found the whole family assembled in the front yard in a state of excitement and the host, with coat off, tearing up the flooring of the piazza.

"What is the matter, good people?" he asked.
"Oh, a rat or some other animal has died under the piazza and we shall have typhoid if the body is not removed."
"Poor souls!" the botanist exclaimed, "that is no dead rat. It is only a stinkhorn, a small fungus that will soon disappear. It is not necessary to unfloor your piazza on its account, Why, here it is outside on the grass, and you have had all this work for nothing!"

Eastern North American Stinkhorn Mushroom, *Phallus ravenelii.*

Eastern North American Stinkhorn Mushroom, *Phallus ravenelii*.
The reason for alluding to this vile smelling form of vegetable life is to prevent a similar occurrence. The color, to be sure, is as bad as that of carrion; but, once perceived, it will never afterward be mistaken for anything else. Therefore, it would be a good idea to get one whiff of it at least from the mushroom table at the state fair, where it will be kept tightly corked as as not to befoul the air. Examining the structure through the glass in which it will be encased you will note a cylindrical stem set in a cup of jelly. The stem is capped when mature by a cone perforated at the top and smeared with dark green slime, which holds the spores. It is from this slime that the bad smell chiefly comes, which is attractive to

flies, the active agents in distributing the spores.

The stem is covered with an exquisitely fashioned network. When in the bulbous state, before the stem emerges from the cup and the strong odor is developed, the plant is eaten by the peasantry of Europe, with whom wild mushrooms are a staple article of food.

Notes:
1. Only five *Liatris* species are native to the state: *L. aspera*, Tall or Rough Blazing Star; *L. cylindracea*, Ontario or Cylindric blazing star; L. *ligulistylis*, Rocky Mountain or Northern Blazing Star; *L. punctata* . var. *punctata*, Dotted Blazing Star; and *L. pycnostachya*, Prairie or Great Blazing Star.
2. There is some issue here with her words. Four were introduced to the wild garden by 1911 based on her Garden Log, not three. They were *L. pycnostachya*, introduced in 1907, *L. cylindracea*, introduced in 1908 from the Minnehaha area; and *L. scariosa* and *L. spicata*, both introduced in 1908 also. The latter two are not native to Minnesota but her notes in 1908 state she obtained them from Ft. Snelling and from Mahtomedi. Since some of these species are similar, perhaps she mis-identified them, which may be the case with *L. scariosa* as this is a species of the eastern coast, and as for *L. spicata*, perhaps it may have existed, but like *L. scariosa*, none of the known varieties of this species has been collected in Minnesota.
3. *Grindelia squarrosa*, Curlycup Gumweed. This plant was indigenous to the area. Eloise brought in plants in 1910 from a source in Glenwood Park, within which the Garden was located. Despite the virtues Eloise notes, the Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture considers the plant a noxious weed.
4. *Helenium autumnale* L., Common Sneezeweed. Eloise first obtained this plant for the Garden in 1907 by bringing in specimens she found near the Lake Street Bridge over the Mississippi. She planted more in 1908 and 1909. Martha Crone also planted in the early 1930s. The plant is poisonous to cattle. (UM Herbarium)
5. She discusses this plant in her August 27, 1911 column.
6. Great Blue Lobelia, *Lobelia siphilitica.* It is indigenous to the garden area. Eloise first catalogued it on September 6, 1907.

The text of this article, along with photos by Mary Meeker of Stinkhorn, Blazing Star, Sneezeweed and Gum Plant, was published on Sunday September 3, 1911 in the *Sunday Minneapolis Tribune*. It was one of a series of weekly articles Eloise Butler published in 1911 to help acquaint the public with her newly established Wild Botanic Garden in Glenwood Park Some of the plants she discusses are extant in the Garden today. In brackets within the text, and in the notes, have been added the necessary common name or scientific name, that she did not list in her article. Nomenclature is based on the latest published information from *Flora of North America* and the *Checklist of the Vascular Flora of Minnesota.*

The Wild Botanic Garden in Glenwood Park, became the "Native Plant Reserve" and was then renamed the Eloise Butler Wild Flower Garden in 1929.