

Ephemera of spring

Get outside to appreciate wildflowers and waterfalls!

By Katharine Fletcher

After enduring our lingering and bitter winter, we all want to get outside in the sunshine. May is a good time to see waterfalls in full spate – and, at the fragile end of the spectrum, ephemeral wildflower blossoms, so-called because after blooming, the plant dies back until next year.



What kind of flowers can we see? In dappled sunlight, look for woodland species such as Dutchman's breeches, so-called because they resemble the old-fashioned white "bloomer" pants once worn by Dutch gentlemen long ago. Spring beauties, trilliums, bloodroot, trout lily (dog-tooth violets) and more await discovery. Of course, some city destinations feature tulip and other domesticated "ephemerals."

And waterfalls? There are several fabulous cascades here. There's something particularly soothing about sitting in a patch of sunshine beside a falls.

Tip: if you have nephews, nieces, or little grandchildren nearby, remember they love exploring waterfalls. Take care with your footing: chutes send out spray which may be slippery on nearby rocks. Don't forget to bring binoculars to identify birds – or perhaps mammals such as mink which like to be either in or near water.

Rideau Falls

Sussex Drive near the French Embassy

This outstanding destination lets you walk out on the catwalks above the falls to experience the Rideau River rushing beneath your feet. It slips over a rocky lip, then boils over to join the Ottawa River. The breeze whips spray onto your face, so you cannot help but feel at one with spring's melt-water run-off.

Flowers: tulips, daffodils, and other planted flowers.

Hog's Back Falls

Vincent Massey Park

This extremely rocky falls of the Rideau Canal waterway descends from tranquil Mooney's Bay to plunge among dramatic protrusions of rock supposedly resembling



Photo: Lanark County Tourism

Showy lady slipper's orchids blooming at the Purdon Conservation Area.

a spiny hog's back. Particularly on a windy day, prepare to get soaked but here, just as at Rideau Falls, it's impossible not to feel alive with spring's renewal. What's cool here is the overhead walkway allows access to both sides of the fork in the river, allowing impressive views of water's extraordinary power.

Enjoy the woodland paths alongside the falls which descend to the river and its rocky watercourse. You can stroll or bike here and connect to Dow's Lake or even the Chateau Laurier, which is located right downtown at Entrance Bay Locks, where this branch of the Rideau River – in Canal form – joins the Ottawa.

Flowers: look for trillium, hepatica and spring beauties amid the woods. If you connect with the canal, enjoy the tulip and other ornamental flowerbeds.

Purdon Conservation Area

Okay ... there isn't a waterfall here but this is such a special place, you'll have to revel, instead, in a cascade of blossoms in a pretty wetland.

Come here to witness an outstanding display of native showy lady's slipper orchids, which can be 2/3 of a metre high! It's no wonder these pretty rose pink and white orchids are named "showy." Here, a huge colony of 10,000 or so carpets the ground: it's a breathtaking sight after the long winter we've experienced.

The area is named after Joe Purdon who nurtured a small group of these rare orchids into the current expansive colony. Access is wheelchair friendly, and there are picnic tables, hiking trails, and no fee! For a map and directions, visit the website listed.

Flowers: showy ladyslipper orchids, but also many wetland and woodland flowers such as the pitcher plant, leafy white bog orchid, blue flag iris, and many, many more. Concession Road 8, Lanark, Ontario www.mvc.on.ca/places-to-see/purdon

Gatineau Park

Located north of Gatineau, this vast park presents many ephemeral flowers. Both the Friends of Gatineau Park, along with park naturalists, offer guided walks, so enquire about what's on.

Bridal Veil Falls slips down the Eardley Escarpment at the Mackenzie King Estate. This is a gentle waterfall, a favourite of Canada's tenth prime minister, Mackenzie King, who took dignitaries such as Sir Winston Churchill through the forest paths to visit the falls. Here find a small, low wall upon which you can sit and admire the watercourse.

Info: canadascapital.gc.ca;

Friends of Gatineau Park guided walks: guidegatineau.ca/amis-friends

Mackenzie King Estate: www.ncc-ccn.gc.ca/places-to-visit/mackenzie-king-estate
Visitors' Centre: 819-827-2020

Luskville Falls

Located 34 km from Parliament Hill in the Pontiac region of West Quebec. Find it along Highway 148 Ouest, west of Gatineau. Stay on Highway 148 until you see the red brick Hôtel de Ville, at the corner of the gravel road of the same name, heading right (north) to the Eardley Escarpment. Drive here and connect with the Luskville Falls parking lot. Ascend alongside the rushing water, using the network of trails, and gaze down at the flat Ottawa Valley plain extending below you.

Flowers: at both falls, look for woodland spring ephemerals such as wild ginger (especially at Luskville Falls), Dutchman's breeches, spring beauties, trilliums, bloodroot and more.

Katharine Fletcher is author of three historical and natural history guides to our region, including Capital Rambles: Exploring the National Capital Region and Historical Walks: The Gatineau Park Story.

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