Wildflowers: Blooming Bright and Abundant

Posted on

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Much of the beauty of the Sri Lankan country-side away from the manicure lawns and well-tended gardens of the cities and plantation bungalows comes from the fascinating variety of the wildflowers.

The wildflowers in any area are the flowering plants inherent to that place, and which bloom year in and year out, free in nature with no inducement by man. Most wildflowers could be categorized as groups, depending on their ecological needs. In Sri Lanka they grow in the shrub jungles, in tropical rain forests, in open fields and meadows, by the beaches, and on windblown mountains. They bloom beside rivers and streams, break into colour near brooks, emerge through the crevices of rocks, arid thrive on mud and silt.

The interest in wildflowers in Sri Lanka dates back to at least 1,000 B.C. Records of this period show that two great practitioners of the science of ayurveda, Charaka and Susruta, had much praise for the abundance and variety of wildflowers in the island. The Buddhist practice of co-existence with nature, and the respect for all forms of life, including plants, created in Sri Lanka a tradition conducive to the care and protection of wildflowers. From the first ever nature reserve at Mihintale, to the Mahamega Park at Anuradhapura where trees were protected by royal edict, the tradition of protecting the indigenous flora has continued, and is observed today in even the smallest of Buddhist temples. A rural homestead is an excellent example of the respect with which wildflowers are treated by the people, and an open laboratory for the study of the flowering seasons.

Sri Lanka has not less than 3,000 known species of wild flowering plants. Of these at least 515 are recognized as having medicinal values. While the records of early travellers such as the Moroccan Ibn Batuta (14th Century), and many others who followed, have made special mention of the wildflowers they have seen in Sri Lanka, the more detailed categorizing of these had to await later observers in the 18th, 19th and present centuries. As the hill country proved the most attractive to these researchers, they have identified four main zones of wildflowers in the montane regions. They are Tropical Wet Evergreen Forests, the Tropical Montane Forests, the higher Moist Wet Evergreen Forests, and the Tropical Dry Mixed Evergreen Forests. Subsequent researchers are still busy categorizing the wildflowers in the lower regions and maritime zones of the island.

While the student of tropical botany and the expert on wildflowers could be kept busy for many years in Sri Lanka, the best way to make a pleasant encounter with the wild flora here is a jungle hike of about two weeks. But the loveliness of the wildflowers is not hidden even from the most casual visitor to the island, who looks for the beauty of nature which abounds. Not many who seek wildflowers would fail to be delighted by the flower which the Sinhalese name “kapukinissa” (Hibiscus primulinus) which grows in and around the lower momane forests. The plants which

bloom from October to April present an eye-catching display of crimson-yellow flowers and the centre has a tinge of red. All the beauty begins to wither the moment the flower is severed from its stem, but if a bud is picked and placed in water, it begins to bloom. A little trick of nature which any rural child will be only too glad to show you.

Among the commonest of wildflowers is the “bovitiya” (Osbeckia wightiana) which grows well in open spaces where there is plenty of sunshine both in the warm and wet regions of the island. The ‘bovitiya’ also produces a casty fruit which is a favourite among rural children. The large flower is of purple hue, with yellow filaments and pollen. The plant is a common sight at Buddhist temples and hermitages in the South of Sri Lanka, and its flower has inspired many a poem in the Sinhalese language.

In regions which have an elevation of more than 5,000 ft, there is an unusual scene awaiting the wildflower enthusiast. It is the flower of “varuniya” (Hedyotis lawsoniae) the small white flower, with a soft purple line on the inside of the petals. It blooms mainly in September/October, adorning shurbs which grow up to about 6 ft in height. What is peculiar about the flower is its attraction for a particularly vicious species of ants which the villagers call “yakkadi” or devil ants. Quite often one could see a line of these ants carrying the flowers with great care, almost simulating the fervour of a devotee carrying flowers to temple.

The mussanda (Mussaenda frondosa), among the tropical flowers of the island, is linked with ancient Buddhist legend. There is the story that when the Buddha had lost his way in the forest, it was the mussanda flower which helped him discover the correct way. Known commonly as “val buthsarana”, the golden yellow flower, with thick petals, grows in large clusters resembling a large ear ornament. The plant which grows wild and healthy in most rural areas has leaves with a fine hairy down on them, and some of the leaves are white, adding to the beauty of the plant. The ·plant and its flowers are used in medicine, and as food, by the rural folk.

Among the many wildflowers of Sri Lanka, that which has won most fame is the “rhododendron”, known popularly as “ma-rathmal” (Rhododendron arboreum). The flowers, which bloom from February to June, are dark crimson in colour and have ten petals and at least ten filaments. Each flower has a circumference of about 1.5 to 2 inches. While the rhododendron plant usually grows to a height of four or five feet, in the montane forests of Sri Lanka the flowers bloom regal on trees nearly 60 feet high.



Jasmines add their gentle fragrance to the other wildflowers. (Ravi Prasad Herath)

There are many species of wildflowers which are nocturnal blooms. Of these the soft “sepalika” (Nycanthus arbor-tritis) has the golden-red colour of a king coconut. The speedy wilting of this beautiful flower has promoted many a Sinhala poet to use it as an image of inconstant love. The “atteriya” (Murraya paniculate) is a tiny flower, but rich in perfume. The aflorescence of one night will cover the entire plant, leaves, branches and all, spreading its sweet scent all round.

The little white jasmine which grows in most rural gardens has a special place in the preparation of trays of floral offerings in temples and in the making of garlands. Of the white and blue varieties of “katurolu” (Clitorea ternatea), the white is used in medicine and the blue is toxic, but has been compared by poets to blue peacock feathers. The “monaramala” or peacock flower (Caesalpinia pulcherima) which is a very pleasant flower in yellow and red hue is used by Buddhists and Hindus in the worship of Hindu deities, and the “rathmal” or ixoras are in great demand for the worship of the Hindu God Skanda, whose colour is red.

A brief walk along a city road, and quiet stroll down any rural footpath, camping out in the open, be it in the low country or in the hills in Sri Lanka, is bound to provide rich material for those who seek the charms of the wild flora. Very often it is not only the wildflowers which one finds, but the legends. of the people, and the rituals which are still part of the life of Sri Lanka can also be discovered in even the

simplest search for the untended beauty of nature. (Excerpted from an article in Sinhalese.)