

Cataloging nature's finest

Minnesota Wildflowers website aims to index all

1:37 PM, Sep 7, 2012 | [Comments](#)



Minnesota Wildflowers documents plants and state f...: Peter Dziuk works with Catherine Chayka to document state flowers and plants for an online field guide.

Written by
Ann Wessel

FILED UNDER

Life
Sartell
Wright County

Textler uses several field guides in her work. Some of her favorites, such as "Wildflowers of Wisconsin and the Great Lakes Region," provide detail but show species that grow elsewhere. Minnesota Wildflowers not only features more information than a field guide could pack in, but Textler said it also shows what often-variable plants look like here.

Site's origins

The Minnesota Wildflowers website started with a spot of purple.

Chayka, 56, of New Brighton, was walking through a park when the flower caught her attention. She returned the next day to photograph it with a point-and-shoot Kodak. Identifying the flower — a New England aster — proved a daunting task. Minnesota was on the fringe of the regional guides she consulted. Many of the entries were nonnative. She decided to make things easier for others.

"It just sort of sucked me in. Once I started doing it, I couldn't stop," Chayka said by telephone. "I think I needed that kind of a distraction in my life at that point, and it was something I just found so interesting because every plant is different ... and you go out there, and every two weeks it changes. It just struck me how interesting and fascinating and wonderful this all was."

Chayka grew up near Syracuse, N.Y., and worked in Florida before she moved to Minnesota almost 20 years ago.

"I used to tell people I was allergic to the outdoors. Before the wildflowers, I was a workaholic, and I never went outdoors. I would be sitting in an air-conditioned office all day long, and that was my life," Chayka said.

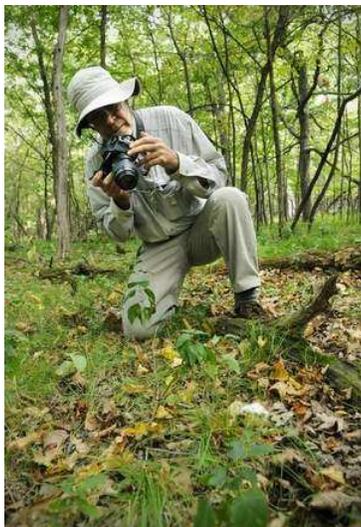
By contrast, Dziuk, 59, of New Brighton, grew up near Alexandria "with a shotgun in one hand and a fishing rod in the other." He started capturing native plants while he was photographing weeds for the Department of Agriculture, using a digital camera provided through a grant in 1992. Part of his job was to educate people about weeds — an endeavor he described as "pointless" because the department could offer no solutions.

"Before you know it, (I had) 60,000 images," Dziuk said. "I was always worried I was going to die this old man with all these images on his computer in the basement."

Chayka and Dziuk got to know each other during Minnesota Native Plant Society field trips. By then, Chayka had published about 300 species on the site. They shared an interest in promoting native species. Chayka went on to become a Minnesota Master Naturalist.

"It's important to know the difference between native, which is beneficial to our ecology, and nonnative, which is not — especially if people are making gardening choices," Chayka said. "A lot of people aren't even aware of the invasive species issues that are out there. We're trying to teach people that there is a difference."

The difference is about more than identification; Chayka said she was concerned that invasives don't provide what insects need to survive. Dziuk takes a more confrontational approach.



Plant specialist and photographer Peter M. Dziuk, searches for a couple of species of plants Aug. 16

in the Clear Lake SNA area along the Mississippi River near Clear Lake. / Jason Wachter, jwachter@stcloudtimes.com

WILDFLOWER VIEWING

Peter M. Dziuk recommends

Wildflowers in Minnesota

More

“Gardeners think of themselves as environmentalists. They simply are not,” Dziuk said. “Flowers weren’t put here for us. They were put here for insects. ... As we swap out the bottom of the food chain, everything else starts to disappear.”

In the field

“I’m a little disappointed. This is all washed away,” Dziuk said on a recent Thursday morning as he surveyed the flood-carved Mississippi River shoreline at the Clear Lake Scientific & Natural Area (SNA) near Clearwater. “Ideally, I’m looking for some mud flats.”

Dziuk had navigated prickly underbrush and scrambled down a steep bank to reach this point in his search for Virginia bugleweed and smaller forget-me-not.

“This is all really denigrated,” Dziuk said, pointing out nonnatives including motherwort, stinging nettle and a thick mat of creeping Charlie. Usually, Dziuk said SNA trips are more productive because the land is protected for good reason.

He pulled up a plant with clover-like leaves and small, yellow flowers. Three weeks ago, he wouldn’t have known whether the wood sorrel was *oxalis stricta* or *oxalis dillenii*. But intensive study allowed him to confidently point to the stiff hairs and upright seed pods, and declare it *oxalis stricta*.

Dziuk tends to use the Latin names when he describes even the most common plants. He provides notes; Chayka writes the online descriptions. In addition to relying on books, she now collaborates with a USDA conservationist.

“It was always intended to be the resource for the ordinary person, for the non-botanist to learn what is that thing growing in the ditch,” Chayka said.

They aim to catalog all 2,400 species of vascular plants in Minnesota. Chayka said the long-term goal is to become the online resource for the Upper Midwest.

Dziuk’s work with the USDA has taken him to all 87 counties. Together, he and Chayka, who still works as a Web designer, have sought out plants in about half of the counties. They had two more trips planned this year — one to Aitkin and Itasca counties, another to the Superior National Forest.

On the way home from their Glacial Lakes State Park camping excursion, they stopped to explore some granite outcroppings near St. Cloud.

After his stop at the SNA, where his most exciting find was some chicken of the woods fungus he planned to turn into a chip dip, Dziuk was off to Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge, where he had a permit to traipse about where most visitors aren’t allowed.

Later that week he was in Whitewater State Park. Making Minnesota Wildflowers a nonprofit a couple of months ago not only ensured its survival after its creators are gone; it also allowed the duo to solicit donations to help offset their travel expenses.

Because they capture plants in various stages, Chayka and Dziuk will continue their field pursuits into November.