

THE WILDERNESS GARDEN

CRANBERRY GLADES BOTANICAL AREA WEST VIRGINIA



The Allegheny Highlands harbor many botanical secrets. Comprising the highest elevations in the mid-Atlantic it's a place of subtle contrast and surprising northerly climes. Perhaps no place embodies this remarkable region better than West Virginia's Cranberry Glades. The "Glades"

as it's known among wilderness enthusiasts, is a rich mix of northerly hardwood forests and dense stands of red spruce among a random mosaic of shrubby cranberry and sphagnum moss glades. Buffeted by a massive ridge on the east it forms two watersheds, the Cranberry and Williams River. Ultimately both merge into the ancient Gauley River further downstream. The attending mountains and hollows that steward these highland rivers are biologically more akin to parts of eastern Canada than the Virginias. Vast expansive views spread across boggy hollows and steep ravines. While the backcountry wilderness is a major attraction, there is something incredibly special for the garden enthusiast and plant explorer.

A quick walk into this highland ecosystem reveals a world of moss and lichens adding an elfin woodland affect to the forest. Dome shaped mounds of star and plume moss provide an important seed nursery for trees and shrubs. Intermixed in the moss mounds are many lichens, some leaf-like, others like tinny green flakes. Reindeer moss (a type of lichen) forms demure, tendril-like fingers to create a tiny ghostly, pale green

shrub. Most interesting perhaps, are the British soldier lichens. Like miniature trees the "soldiers" frequently exhibit a stunningly bright red cap of spores, some curiously trumpet shaped. Often attending the mounds of moss are clubmoss, the most primitive vascular plant in the forest. Not a moss at all, but a fern ally. Club mosses are indeed club-like or like perfect miniature pine trees. The life cycle for clubmoss is twenty years, spores require highly specific soil conditions, rich in fungus and undisturbed by human activity.



Much of Cranberry Glades fascinating plant life is only accessible while hiking on mountainous trails. But one particular area along the Cranberry River is so beautiful and unique the U.S. Forrest Service recognized it should be conserved and interpreted as a distinct botanical area...a wilderness garden for the horticulturally curious native plant enthusiast. It was designated a National Natural Landmark in 1974.

Around the country many botanical gardens work hard to recreate particular habitats to cultivate native plants. At the National Arboretum, Fern Valley displays native plants from the mid-Atlantic. Meadowlark Botanical Gardens in northern Virginia has a garden for plants found only in the Potomac River basin. Near

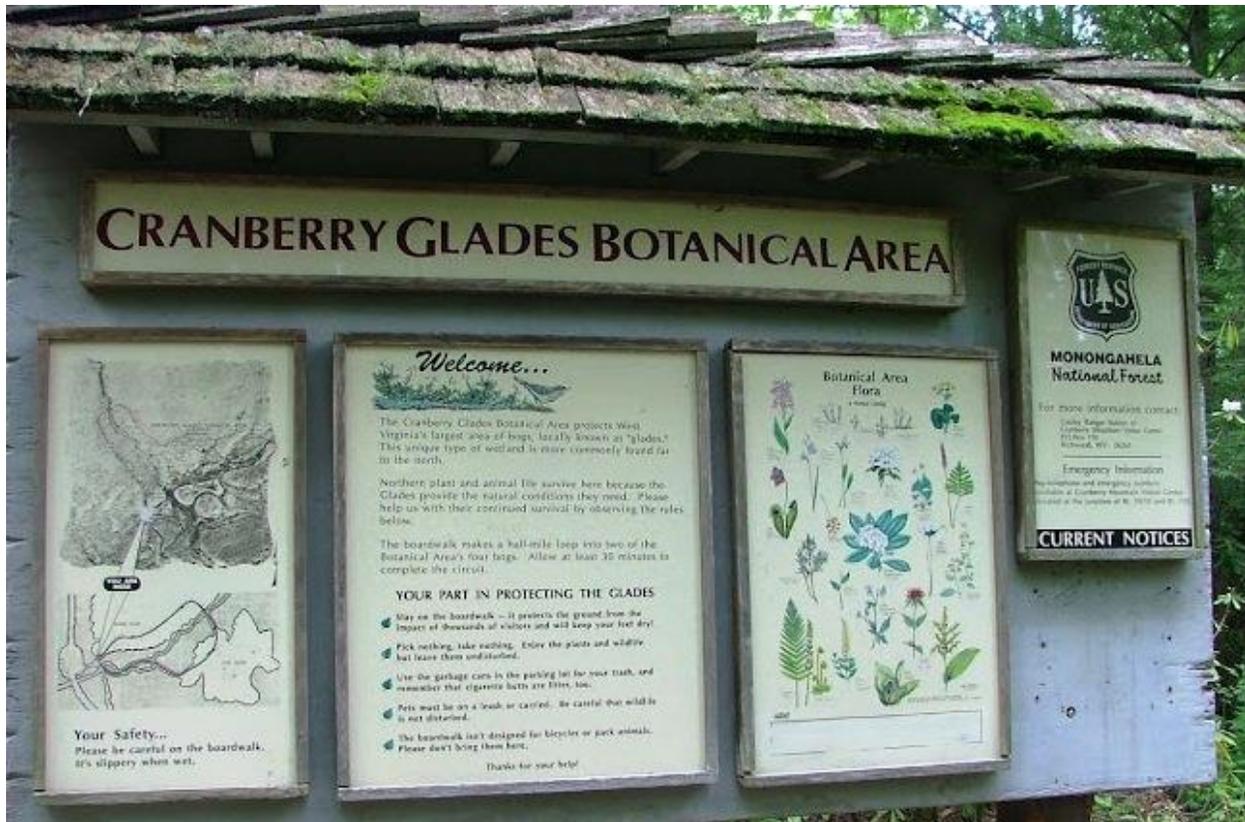
Boston, the New England Wild Flower Society grows an amazing variety of north easterly native plants. Not far from Newark Delaware, Mt. Cuba Center for the study of Piedmont flora is world renowned for native plant horticulture. Huge effort goes into these collections; they are both botanically and horticulturally focused. Garden staff may spend decades propagating and tending the most difficult native plants in a prized collection. Yet they can never recreate a true ecosystem developed over millions of years that fostered growth of a complex native plant habitat. Only the wilderness can do that, and the Cranberry Glades Botanical Area is proof. Instead of visiting a botanical garden to see the carefully curated native plant collection, here you visit a natural area where the gardening is up to nature.



The botanical area at Cranberry Glades is circled by an elevated board walk; this allows access where it's nearly impassible due to deep, wet, boggy soil. For the garden visitor interested in native plants this is the ultimate collection, entirely wild but blissfully accessible. Walking into the botanical area one realizes open pasture-like glades are a big part of the habitat. The tell-tale sign that the area has a distinct northerly character is the cotton grass. Not a grass, but a sedge, with cotton-like filaments that speckle the glade with tawny-white tufts. These curious plants spread for acres beyond the board walk above a mix of emerald sphagnum moss and squat cranberry shrubs. Mixed along the walk as if planted in an intentional boarder are large rust-colored

cinnamon ferns often reaching four or five feet high. This unique fall coloration would thrill any ornamental gardener. Nestled among the ferns, native winter berry displays a spray of bright red berries as if ordered from a fine florist. But their more than beautiful, when the harsh winter arrives, the berries will sustain many native animals who ride out the mountain winter.

Fall flowers in the botanical area make a visual statement any carefully tended garden would be lucky to achieve. Blue lobelias emerge happily from a damp margin, their deep color unique in the fall landscape. Nearby, boneset burst forth with a whitish-gray flowers reaching for the sun as butterflies happily harvest nectar. Golden rod makes an appearance in several locations, but determining which one is tricky, more than fifty species are known in the mid-Atlantic. New England asters form a cluster of small daisies draped over a perfectly reclining log. Bright yellow tick-seed sunflowers flow along the boardwalk in a near perfect bunchy, floral display. Very often these flowers emerge from shrubbery of great rhododendron and one of several native viburnums.



Beyond the shrubs many northerly trees signal the fall color change. Red maples crimson leaves mix with shades of yellow from basswood and sweet birch while the clustered red berries of mountain ash feed south-bound migrating birds. Standing like knowing sentinels, the mighty red spruce changes little and simply awaits another cold winter, its branches soon to be swept with blowing snow. For the true high Appalachian garden experience Cranberry Glades Botanical Area shows that nature can be the ultimate gardener when native plants in the wild are revealed in their natural habitat.

From the BGT Team-more info at www.fs.usda.gov/recarea/mnf/recarea/