

Smart financial choices are just part of the puzzle

Take a little time for a quiet walk in the spring forest

A quiet walk in the woods this time of year can put you back in touch with nature in a way that will feed the soul. Birdsong and wood pecker drumming fill the woods as the cries of wild geese winging north provide rich background music. Watch where you place your feet. On the forest floor the precious ephemeral wildflowers are bursting forth. Now is the time to slow down and enjoy their fleeting beauty. Look and perhaps photograph but please don't pick or collect. Few of these delicate beauties take kindly to cultivation (although some will voluntarily take up residence in a shaded semi-wild perennial garden).

The spring beauty is one of the earliest to show its delicate blossoms, sometimes peeking out through a late snowfall. The diminutive trout lily has a graceful yellow bloom and the shy bloodroot will only show its single white blossom when the sun is shining.

These wildflowers will vanish entirely if disturbed by much foot traffic – human or otherwise. Efforts to “clean up” a wild area are also likely to discourage them while natural blow downs, branches and last year’s leaves are exactly what they want.

Penn State experts: messy woods make great habitat

Piles of leaves and snags of downed trees and branches may seem unsightly in the woods. Left alone woods become “messy,” and our tendency is to “clean them up.”

But don't be in a big hurry to clean up the forest. That is the advice from woodland experts at Pennsylvania State University. Standing dead snags provide homes for owls, woodpeckers and squirrels, to name a few. A hollow tree is the ideal drum for woodpeckers seeking to impress a would-be mate.

On the forest floor, insects, salamanders, snakes, mice and shrews make homes in rotting logs. Skunks, bears and woodpeckers repeatedly return to these cafeterias for easy pickings. A grouse may use a downed log as a drumming site.

Organic material, including damp, rotting wood and leaves encourages mushroom populations. Mushrooms provide food for insects, turtles, birds, mice, squirrels and deer. The mineral-rich mushrooms can compensate for nutrient deficiencies in deer's native winter forage.

The number and variety of creatures that depend on forest debris can be surprising,

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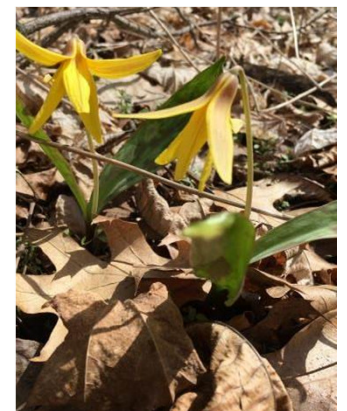
Spring Beauty varies from deep pink to white.



Blood Root loves a ray of sunshine.



Dutchmen's breeches – the yellow variety is called Squirrel Corn.



Trout lily derives its name from its distinctively mottled leaves.

"If you spend too much time working on your weaknesses, all you end up with is a lot of strong weaknesses." ~ Dan Sullivan

Northeast 111 – a hiking challenge

There are some beautiful mountains in this part of the country, many of them offering great hiking opportunities. If you include Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York there are – depending on whom you ask – somewhere between 111 and 115 peaks that top 4,000 feet. There is even a mountaineering sport of “peak bagging.”

The Appalachian Mountain Club even awards a patch to anyone who summits all of New Hampshire’s 4,000-foot-plus peaks and also recognizes those who summit all of New England’s 4000 footers.

It’s only fair that a New Hampshire based organization is the arbiter of New England Mountains. It can lay claim to 48 of those 4,000-foot-plus peaks, with Mount Washington, 6,288 feet, easily topping the rest. In the high peaks of the Adirondacks, Mount Marcy, at 5,344 feet, is the highest of 46 mountains 4,000 feet and higher.

Maine has 14 of these 4,000-foot mountains, of which Mount Katahdin is the highest at 5,268 feet. Vermont has just five high peaks, of which Mansfield is the highest at 4,393.



The beauty of hiking the mountains in this part of the country is there tend to be wonderful places within a half hour drive or less of where you live. The other advantage is there are mountains, even 4,000 feet and higher, that are accessible to many hikers. In most cases, trails are very well marked and maintained. Others can offer really serious challenges, both from the terrain and weather, especially New Hampshire’s Presidential Range. (The Mount Washington observatory has the world record for the highest wind speed not involving a cyclone, 231 miles per hour.)

If you are interested in taking on the challenge of the Northeast’s 4,000-foot peaks, check with local groups that offer excellent advice for the novice and great comradery for the experienced hiker. The web site, <http://4000footers.com>, provides information about the peaks in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Information on the Adirondack peaks can be found at <http://www.cnyhiking.com/ADK46HighPeaks.htm>.

Penn State experts say don’t “clean” the woods,
continued

especially since you rarely see most of them. Elevated logs provide nesting sites for many birds and smaller mammals like shrews and chipmunks. Larger ones may even be homes for foxes and coyotes. Logs and stumps in some locations meet the special habitat needs of salamanders and some frogs and turtles.

“Ecologists believe dead wood is one of the greatest resources for animals species in the forest,” according to the experts at Penn State.

Scalloped Pineapple Casserole

¾ cup butter	1 ½ tsp. lemon juice
3 eggs	1 20-oz. can crushed pineapple, drained
1 ¼ cups sugar	
4 cups firmly packed cubed white bread, crusts removed	

In mixing bowl, cream together butter and sugar. Add eggs, beat well. Stir in pineapple and lemon juice. Gently fold in bread cubes. Spoon into a greased 2-quart baking dish. Bake uncovered at 350 degrees for 40 to 45 minutes. Serve warm. Makes 6 servings. (If doubling the recipe, use 1 cup butter, total.)

Note: This recipe comes from the new cookbook, “The Cooks of Hackett’s Orchard,” and was contributed by Jessica Remmey. The cookbook is available at Hackett’s Orchard in South Hero.