

# Prairiebreak

Horticultural and botanical musings from the Rockies, Great Plains and beyond. In humble tribute to Goddess Flora.

Monday, June 2, 2014

## Backlands to some, heart lands to others



*Alnus viridis ssp. crispa*

The locals were surprised at how much I was enchanted with the common alder in the Maritimes: it is ubiquitous, and apparently non-descript most of the year, but in spring the dangling aments glisten like golden earrings, and last year's cone-like capsules are a wonderful contrasting black. Of course, this grew in every kind of habitat--but every region seems to boast something unique. In the Halifax area of Nova Scotia there is an extensive ecosystem that is not found anywhere else: they call them the "backlands"--and they extend along a series of hills almost to the sea in a belt south and a bit West of the city. I was very lucky to spend a day with knowledgeable locals who are hoping to find ways of having the backlands preserved in perpetuity. Although only encompassing a thousand or so acres, the backlands have many faces and facets: I was enchanted!

### Picture of the month



Sunset from Quince

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**Panayoti Kelaidis**

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### Rock gardening rules!



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Lichen and crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*)

The ecosystem is dominated by crowberry and jack pines—both of which are common enough elsewhere. But here, they combine in a sort of "barrens" (rather like the shale barrens and sand barrens found in parts of the eastern United States) where many other unusual plants occur, and the trees become gnarly and the landscape crusty with lichens, forming a distinct and distinctive wild garden that is entirely dependent on recurrent fires. Our leader (an ecologist I shall introduce in a bit) said that fire should really occur here at least every few decades: eventually the gnarly, bonsai like jack pines begin to succumb to disease, and the overburden of flammable growth would surely spark a conflagration far worse than the periodic lightning fires that maintained this ecosystem long before humans and our interventions. Since much of the backlands occupy high points and ridges where the wealthy love to perch their megamansions, there is a possibility that developers would like to level much of this complex ecosystem. I hope the movement to preserve this relatively compact and special area succeeds: there's lots of other less flammable (and fragile) places for plutocrats to perch their palaces I would think...

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*Prunus pensylvanica*

Pin cherry is a rather local plant in my area near Denver, but it was dotted around the barrens--a stunning flower this time of year.



A "pseudo" bunkers--a number of these installations mimicking real gun were scattered around Halifax during the war to fool potential bombers. This one attracted some vandals, although their artwork is upstaged somewhat dramatic patterning made by the seeping colors from the cement.

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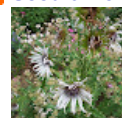
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Although dominated by pines, there are many deciduous trees and shrubs here as well--aspen, maple and a wonderful groundcover of ericaceous plants in a half dozen genera.



Blueberries and crowberry make a groundcover that would be the envy of any designer!



The jackpines are all relatively stunted, and the shallow soils over the granite are hungry: the lichens seem to be the most enthusiastic colonizers. Many of these are decades old--prime for another fire!



I was enchanted by the cloud like masses of reindeer-like lichens everywhere...



They made patterns that suggested abstract art.



*Pinus banksiana*

More than anything, I kept thinking "Japanese Garden" as I looked around the area--the gnarly little jackpines and the rich texture of groundcover could easily be tweaked to create a heavenly Japanese garden if one wished to do so: why bother--I prefer what's already here!



Much to my delight, there was Rhodora in the moist spots (*Rhododendron canadense*)--one of the loveliest shrubs herabouts. Truth be said, it's so abundant around Halifax I don't think I saw a single one in a garden...





*Onoclea sensibilis*

Sensitive fern forming an uncharacteristically tight clump--usually these spread widely. I love this despite its spready tendencies...



*Pinus banksiana*

The culmination of our hike was at a huge old Jackpine which was at the very edge of the burn: the lefthand side had been torched (with open cones), the right hand side survived! What a textbook example of the species.



Here's a closer look at it...



*Gaultheria procumbens*

I loved the burnished color of wintergreen in the full sun on the recently burned area.



*Alnus viridis ssp. crispa*

More alder: I must find this one. Something tells me it may not be easy!



The dead trees stretch on for acres: this will not be forested again for some time, but a wonderful carpet of color is already growing thickly beneath. To build homes here is a sort of madness--this is a landscape that relies on fires.



To the untrained eye the barrens are austere and homely. To the trained eye they are rich and varied.



David Patriquin is a remarkable and very versatile biologist has dedicated countless hours to scouring the region studying the vegetation. What a privilege to spend a day with him! Check out [his website](#) to see the wide range of his study and experience. His enthusiasm for the area was contagious!



*Gaultheria procumbens* and *Vaccinium* spp.

I love the persian carpet of tiny ericads everywhere.



*Vaccinium angustifolium*

The lowbush blueberry, growing out of the charred earth, looked ever so happy. I'll bet there will be a good crop of berries in a few weeks!



*Gaultheria procumbens*

More wintergreen on the charred earth--the berries from last year persisting and peeking through!



*Hudsonia ericoides*

The lovely yellow flowered "heather" was found here and there: I've seen *Hudsonia* growing abundantly on Long Island and the New Jersey Pine barrens--although perhaps not this species.



*Chamaedaphne calyculata*

I've found leatherleaf in quite a range of habitats in both Newfoundland and Nova Scotia--these seem to love the burned over areas and bloomed prolifically and compactly.



*Aralia nudicaulis*



I have never seen so much Sarsaparilla! It's in all the woodlands hereabouts, growing right to the edge of the highways, and all of it seems to be this refulgent bronze! It grows near Denver--rather sparsely to be honest--but I've never seen it this time of its growth. Just love the color.



*Aralia nudicaulis*



*Aralia nudicaulis*



*Osmunda cinnamomea*

Cinnamon fern seems to be everywhere as well: I must get good clumps of all these good Eastern natives growing at home--they're magnificent!



*Juniperus communis*

The common juniper could have been growing in the hills above Denver!



*Chamaedaphne calyculata*

A Guinness book of records blooming mass of Leatherleaf: I doubt we could reproduce this on our dry, windy plains!



*Corema conradii*

This rather rare Ericad occurs in barrens in the United States as well—but never common. A beautiful groundcover.



The various crowberries, coremas, vacciniums and other ericads all make dense cushions on the hungry barrens- a wonderful tapestry of color all year long.



We drove down closer to the sea on a Cove where trees shrunk to miniature size and all the miniatures took over.



*Sarracenia purpurea*

Pitcher plants are a dime a dozen here in Nova Scotia--but I can never have enough!



*Morella pensylvanica*

I was delighted to stumble on my first bayberery growing among the junipers--with characteristic fruit.



Crowberries, strawberries--a wonderful contrast



*Festuca* aff. *rubra*

A tiny fescue growing out of the cracked asphalt of the abandoned road--would love to grow this!



David surveying the realm....



A beautiful miniature *Scirpus* along the pathway...I thought it was veyr decorative.



Thalassa Thalassa!

And now we got down near the sea.





*Juniperus horizontalis*

How funny to find another dwarf juniper, this one also occurring not too far away in Northern Colorado. How strange to find so many familiar plants among the exotic.



Much of the coastal headlands have been preserved, but the neighboring jackpine/crowberry ecosystem is still potentially "developable". I have been privileged to visit a variety of Provincial parks around Halifax. They have been generous in setting aside many of the lakes and woods that have the conventional "woody" feel people love so much. We have seen scads of pink ladyslippers and trilliums and *Clintonia borealis* galore, but I believe that this endangered coastal and exposed Backland would one day have far greater economic benefit and biological significance. I hope that the far seeing conservationists prevail--and this swath of just 1000 acres or so south of Halifax may one day be preserved in perpetuity.

- [June 02, 2014](#)

### 3 comments:

**Anonymous** [June 2, 2014 at 8:51 PM](#)

Is the three-leaved plant in your first picture of *Gaultheria procumbens* a *Sibbaldia*? That is a classic rock garden plant.

James

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**Panayoti Kelaidis** [June 3, 2014 at 2:54 AM](#)

Not many alpine at sea level in Nova Scotia--the climate is remarkably mild here: looks like Zone 6b or even 7 in places (they grow healthy *Cryptomerias* here, and a vast spectrum of Chinese rhododendrons and magnolias). The trefoil is actually *Potentilla tridentata*--which is also a classic alpine--and is very common hereabouts. None yet in bloom.

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David Graham Patriquin June 3, 2014 at 6:02AM

Panayoti, thanks so much for your wonderful pics and review of our Backlands. Sometimes it takes a visitor to make us appreciate what we take for granted. I think you were that visitor!

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