



## Chasing the Wild *Epigaea*

by Gary L. Saunders  
with thanks/credit to Saltwire News

Just when you can't take any more post-winter mist and fog, any more mud and muck, any more browns and greys, and more dire COVID-19 news, along comes a tiny pink-and-white glimmer of hope and renewal—if you know where to look.

I know where; but last spring and this spring, busy with new life challenges—just when we needed it most – I forgot. However, a neighbour, bless him, did not forget. And of course, he too knew where to look: alongside the abandoned Dominion Atlantic Railway line that runs parallel to our Shore Road for a piece. Along its banks, on mossy knolls lightly shaded by tall spruce and fir, he found this evergreen mini-shrub and brought two bouquets home, one for his wife and one for us.

He's been doing this for years. Likely saw his father do the same for their family years ago. So have hundreds, maybe thousands of Bluenosers across the province, across the decades. In other words, a springtime rite.

And our mysterious flower? Have you guessed? It's the Mayflower or Trailing Arbutus, the province's official emblem, which blooms hereabouts from mid-April to mid-May. Its Latin title, *Epigaea*, means “near the earth”, and so it is. The rest of the year they're harder to spot, until you learn to recognize its glossy, bronze-green oval leaves trailing over the ground.

But this particular plant doesn't grow just in woods. One also finds it in pastures, up steep hillsides, even on rocky, acidic barrens from Labrador to mountainous Tennessee and west to Manitoba.

Answering my friend's early morning tap at our porch door, I find him proffering a small water glass full, their woody stems carefully swathed in wet tissue. Touched, I thank him for his thoughtfulness and set them on our kitchen table so my wife, when she wakes, will see and smell them over breakfast. The fragrance, musky-sweet, is unlike that of any other flower I know save Newfoundland's twin-flower—which is also pinkish-white and bell-like.

My first exposure to the Mayflower and its almost mythic spell happened in the spring of 1966, after I began working full-time with the then department of Lands and Forests' extension division in Truro. One afternoon, hearing a murmur of excitement from the outer office, I glanced up to see a middle-aged Indigenous woman with plaited black hair making the rounds with a basketful. Asking a dollar-a-bunch, she soon had a line-up. By the time she got to our end, her homemade basket was empty and she was making for the elevator, all smiles.

That day, I never got a close look at the flowers, nor even a sniff. So afterwards I asked my boss, Lloyd Hawboldt, about them and got the scoop. By the following year I'd found my own trove near Clifton, and brought home a bouquet, the first of many over the years.

Incidentally, a word of warning – picking Mayflowers near the same spot one spring, I spotted my first mainland Lady's Slipper Orchid. Having already met it in Newfoundland, I unwisely brought it back home to transplant—which failed—and haven't seen one there since. My bad. For such orchids are rare, with exacting soil requirements and shouldn't be tampered with. Not so much the Mayflower – though over-picking and/or undue site disturbance could maybe do them in.

More likely, the way things are going, the culprit will be climate change. In Japan this spring the annual cherry blossom celebrations happened the earliest (March 26) since A.D. 1409! And here in North America, we're told that the last seven years have been our warmest since the 1880s. So before long we'll be calling *Epigaea* "Marchflower"? And to find any in April-May, the normal time, we'll have to hike the Cape Breton Highlands, or Labrador's Mealy Mountains?

Strange world we're making.

