In Nature's Garden

by Elizabeth Murray

Ironweed

Late summer is the time for the high, tough, showy weeds, a great many of them yellow, and a great many of them belonging to the daisy family, or Compositae. All the heleniums, the black-eyed susans and the goldenrods come into their own at this time of year. Plant taxonomy classes often have unprintable names for these big, yellow daisies because there are so many of them and their classification is so complicated that it becomes a daunting task for all but the most highly dedicated. However, in all of this yellow sea along the roadsides and throughout the pastures in August and September, there is one large, conspicuous member of the Compositae which is easy to spot and identify by virtue of its striking color, not yellow, but a deep, rich purple, and that is ironweed.

The Compositae is the largest family of flowering plants in the world and the flower structure is unique to the family. What we normally think of as one flower is, in the daisy family, actually a whole group of flowers forming a composite head, hence the name of the family. In many members, the flowers are of two types, ray flowers and disc flowers. But in ironweed the flowers are of only on type, the disc type, and the flower heads are therefore said to be *discoid*. Each ironweed flower is *perfect*, that is, each flower has both male and female parts. Each flower head is supported by an *involucre* composed of many overlapping bract-like structures called *phyllaries*.

Ironweed grows very tall, to as much as seven feet high with branching stems and slender pointed leaves all up the stems. The leaves are very dark green, sometimes almost deep purple themselves.

Vernonia must have a moist habitat to grow well, and it is found commonly along stream banks and in the wetter areas of almost every pasture. The various species hybridize freely and so it is often difficult to determine the species, but the one most commonly found in Virginia is *Vernonia novaboracensis*. Ironweed is primarily a plant of the southeastern states although some forms are found as far north as Massachusetts.

The flower books describe ironweed as a "rank perennial" which is not a very flattering appellation. It is certainly a tough, hardy, persistent and common weed, but I, for one, am grateful for its bold, colorful appearance at the end of summer, and I expect Mr. Vernon was, too. William Vernon was an early English botanist who travelled in North America in the late seventeenth century, and it is for him that the genus *Vernonia* is named. □

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