

AUGUST WEEK (1852)

by Henry David Thoreau

Aug. 15. Some birds fly in flocks. I see a dense, compact flock of bobolinks going off into the air over a field. They cover the rails and alders, and go rustling off with a brassy, tinkling note like a ripe crop as I approach, revealing their yellow breasts and bellies. This is an autumnal sight, that small flock of grown birds in the afternoon sky.

Elder-berry ripe. The river was lowest early in July. Some time past I have noticed meadow-grass floating on the river, reminding me that they were getting the hay up the stream. Some naked viburnum berries are quite dark purple a mid the red, while other bunches are wholly green yet. The red chokeberry is small and green still. I plainly distinguish it, also, by its woolly under side. In E. Hubbard's swamp I gather some large and juicy and agreeable rum cherries. The birds make much account of them. They are much finer than the small ones on large trees; quite a good fruit. Some cranberries turned red on one cheek along the edges of the meadows. Now a sudden gust of wind blows from the northwest, cooled by a storm there, blowing the dust from roads far over the fields. The whole air, indeed, is suddenly filled with dust, and the outlines of the clouds are concealed. But it proves only the wind of the fall, which apparently passes north of us. That clear ring like an alder locust (is it a cricket?) for some time past is a sound which belongs to the season, — autumnal. Here is a second crop of clover almost as red as the first. The swamp blackberry begins. Saw a blue heron on the meadow. *Aster amplexicaulis* of Bigelow, apparently; probably for a day or two. An orchis by the brook under the Cliffs with only three white flowers, only smaller than the fringed white; spurs half an inch long. May it be another species.

Aug. 16 P. M. — Down river in boat with George Bradford.

Zizania aquatica, Indian or Canadian rice, or water oats, like slender corn. How long?

Hibiscus Moscheutos (?), marsh hibiscus, apparently, N. Barrett's. Perchance has been out a week. I think it must be the most conspicuous and showy and at the same time rich-colored flower of this month. It is not so conspicuous as the sunflower, but of a rarer color, — "pale rose-purple," they call it, — like a hollyhock. It is surprising for its amount of color, and, seen unexpectedly amid the willows and button-bushes, with the mikania twining around its stem, you can hardly believe it is a flower, so large and tender it looks, like the greatest effort of the season to adorn the August days, and reminded me of that great tender moth, the *Attacus luna*, which I found on the water near where it grows. I think it must be allied to southern species. It suggests a more genial climate and luxuriant soil. It requires these vaporous dog-days.

Galeopsis Tetrahit, common hemp-nettle, in roadside by Keyes's. How long? Flower like hedge-nettle. *Apios tuberosa*, ground-nut, a day or two. These are locust days. I hear them on the elms in the street, but cannot tell where they are. Loud is their song, drowning many others, but men appear not to distinguish it, though it pervades their ears as the dust their eyes. The river was exceedingly fair this afternoon, and there are few handsomer reaches than that by the leaning oak, the deep place, where the willows make a perfect shore.

At sunset, the glow being confined to the north, it tinges the rails on the causeway lake-color, but behind they are a dead dark blue. I must look for the rudbeckia which Bradford says he found yesterday behind Joe Clark's.

Aug. 17. Twenty minutes before 5 A. M. — To Cliffs and Walden.

Dawn. No breathing of chipbirds nor singing of

robins as in spring, but still the cock crows lustily. The creak of the crickets sounds louder. As I go along the back road, hear two or three song sparrows. This morning's red, there being a misty cloud there, is equal to an evening red. The woods are very still. I hear only a faint peep or twitter from one bird, then the neverfailing wood thrush, it being about sunrise, and after, on the Cliff, the phoebe note of a chickadee, a nightwarbler, a creeper (?), and a pewee (?), and, later still, the huckleberrybird, and redeye, but all few and faint.

Cannot distinguish the steam of the engine toward Waltham from one of the morning fogs over hollows in woods. *Lespedeza violacea* var. (apparently) *angustifolia* (?), *sessiliflora* of Bigelow. Also another *L. violacea*, or at least violet, perhaps different from what I saw some time since. *Gerardia pedicularia*, bushy gerardia, almost ready. The white cornel berries are dropping off before they are fairly white.

Is not the hibiscus a very bright pink or even fleshcolor? It is so delicate and peculiar. I do not think of any flower just like it. It reminds me of some of the wild geraniums most. It is a singular, large, delicate, high-colored flower with a treelike leaf.

Gaylussacia frondosa, blue-tangle, dangle-berry, ripe perhaps a week. Weston of Lincoln thought there were more grapes, both cultivated and wild, than usual this year, because the rose-bugs had not done so much harm.

Aug. 18. 3 P. M. — To Joe Clark's and Hibiscus Bank.

I cannot conceive how a man can accomplish anything worthy of him, unless his very breath is sweet to him. He must be particularly alive. As if a man were himself and could work well only at a certain rare crisis.

The river is full of weeds. The *Hypericum mutilum*,

small-flowered, has in some places turned wholly red on the shore. There is indeed something royal about the month of August. It is a more ingrained and perhaps more tropical heat than that of July. Though hot, it is not so suffocating and unveiled a blaze. The vapors in the air temper it somewhat. But we have had some pretty cool weather within a week or two, and the evenings generally are cooler. As I go over the hill behind Hunt's, the North River has a glassy stillness and smoothness, seen through the smoky haze that fills the air and has the effect of a film on the water, so that it looks stagnant. No mountains can be seen. The locust is heard. The fruits are ripening. Ripe apples here and there scent the air. Huckleberries probably have begun to spoil. I see those minute yellow cocoons on the grass. Hazelnuts; methinks it is time to gather them if you would anticipate the squirrels. The clematis and mikania belong to this month, filling the crevices and rounding the outline of leafy banks and hedges.

Perceived to-day and some weeks since (August 3d) the strong invigorating aroma of green walnuts, astringent and bracing to the spirits, the fancy and imagination, suggesting a tree that has its roots well in amid the bowels of nature. Their shells are, in fact and from association, exhilarating to smell, suggesting a strong, nutty native vigor. A fruit which I am glad that our zone produces, looking like the nutmeg of the East. I acquire some of the hardness and elasticity of the hickory when I smell them. They are among *our* spices. High-scented, aromatic, as you bruise one against another in your hand, almost like nutmegs, only more bracing and northern. Fragrant stones which the trees bear.

The hibiscus flowers are seen a quarter of a mile off over the water, like large roses, now that these high colors are rather rare. Some are exceedingly delicate and pale, almost white, just rose-tinted, others a brighter pink or rose-color, and all slightly plaited (the five large petals) and turned toward the sun, now in the west, trembling in the wind. So much color looks very rich in these localities. The flowers are some four inches in diameter, as large as water-lilies, rising amid and above the buttonbushes and willows, with a large light-green tree-like leaf and a stem half an inch in diameter, apparently dying down to a perennial (?) root each year.

A superb flower. Where it occurs it is certainly, next to the white lily, if not equally with it, the most splendid ornament of the river. Looking up the gleaming river, reflecting the August sun, the round-topped silvery *white* maples, the glossy-leaved swamp white oaks, the ethereal and buoyant *Salix Purshiana*, — the first and last resting on the water and giving the river a full appearance, — and the hibiscus flowers adorning the shores, contrasting with the green across the river, close to the water's edge, the meadows being just shorn, all make a perfect August scene. Here is the place where the hayracks cross the river with their loads. As I made excursions on the river when the white lilies were in bloom, so now I should make a hibiscus excursion.

Rudbeckia laciniata, sunflower-like tall cone-flower, behind Joe Clark's. *Symphytum officinale*, common comfrey, by Dakin, pump-maker's. The *Cerastium viscosum* which I saw months ago, still. And the ovate heads of the tall anemone gone to seed. *Linum usitatissimum*, common flax, with a pretty large and pretty blue flower in the yard. *Rumex obtusifolius*, for weeks, apparently.

Elizabeth Hoar shows me the following plants which she brought from the White Mountains the 16th: *Chiogenes hispidula*, creeping snow-berry, also called *Gaultheria* and also *Vaccinium hispidulum*, in fruit, with a partridgeberry scent and taste; *Taxus Canadensis*, ground hemlock, with red cup-shaped berries, very handsome and remarkably like wax or red marble; *Platanthera orbiculata*, remarkable for its watery shining leaves, flat on the ground, while its spike of flowers rises perpendicular, suggesting, as she said, repose and steadiness amid the prostrate trunks, — and you could not avoid seeing it any more than a child, — in blossom; *Oxalis Acetosella*, in blossom; *Arenaria Groenlandica*, also in bloom, in tufts like houstonia; *Lonicera ciliata*, probably, with a double red fruit. She also brought lichens and mosses and convallaria berries which she gathered at the Flume in Franconia. The latter, red-ripe, hanging from the axils of the leaves, affected me reminding me of the progress of autumn in the north; and the other two were a very fit importation, still dripping with the moisture, the water, of the Flume. It carries you, indeed, into the primitive wood. To think how, in those wild woods, now hang these wild berries, in grim solitude as of yore, already scenting their

autumn! A thousand years ago this convallaria growing there, its berries turning red as now and its leaves acquiring an autumnal tint. Lichens and mosses enough to cover a waiter, still dripping with the water of the Flume, — is not that a true specimen of it?

J. [?] Stacy says that fifty years ago his father used to blow his fire with onion stems. Thinks there have been great improvements. But then, as I hear, there was a bellows-maker in the town. Is not that the *Aster umbellatus* which I found by the lygodium?

Aug. 19. 2 P. M. — To Corner Spring, Burnt Plain, and Brister Hill.

Forget-me-not Brook, *Epilobium lineare* (Bigelow), *molle* (?) (Gray). The small fruits of most plants are now generally ripe or ripening, and this is coincident with the flying in flocks of such young birds now grown as feed on them. The twittering, tinkling *link* notes of the bobolinks occasionally border on the old bobolink strain. The *Epilobium coloratum* is an interesting little flower for its contrasted white and pink; the bud is commonly pink. The *Viburnum dentatum* berries are now blue. I still find the stitchwort (*Stellaria*). Many leaves of the mountain sumach are red. What are the checkerberry-scented plants? Checkerberry; black and yellow birch; polygala, caducous and cross-leaved and *verticillata*, at root; *Chiogenes hispidula*, creeping snowberry. I perceive the fragrance of the clethra on the meadow gales. The checkerberries are in bloom, looking almost like snow-white berries. The dracæna berries, "amethystine blue," are almost all fallen. The dangle-berry is a very handsome tangled berry, but with a slightly astringent and to me not altogether agreeable flavor. What is that large many-flowered hieracium (I think I saw it at same time with the veiny),* with radical leaves and one sheathing leaflet and a spreading panicle minutely downy? *Gronovii*? or *Kalmii*? The trillium berries, six-sided, one inch in diameter, like varnished and stained cherry wood, glossy red, crystalline and ingrained, concealed under its green leaves in shady swamps. It is already fall in some of these shady, springy swamps, as at the Corner Spring. The skunk-cabbages and the trilliums, both leaves and fruit, are many flat prostrate, the former decaying, and all looking as if

early frosts had prevailed. Here, too, the bright scarlet berries of the arum, perhaps premature.

Here is a little brook of very cold spring-water, rising a few rods distant, with a gray sandy and pebbly bottom, flowing through this dense swampy thicket, where, nevertheless, the sun falls in here and there between the leaves and shines on its bottom, meandering exceedingly, and sometimes running underground. The trilliums on its brink have fallen into it and bathe their red berries in the water, waving in the stream. The water has the coldness it acquired in the bowels of the earth. Here is a recess apparently never frequented. Thus this rill flowed here a thousand years ago, and with exactly these environments. It is a few rods of primitive wood, such as the bear and the deer beheld. It has a singular charm for me, carrying me back in imagination to those days. Yet a fisherman has once found out this retreat, and here is his box in the brook to keep his minnows in, now gone to decay. I love the rank smells of the swamp, its decaying leaves. The clear darkgreen leaves of the feverbush overhang the stream.

I name the shore under Fair Haven Hill the Cardinal Shore from the abundance of cardinal-flowers there. The red-stemmed (?) cornel berries are mingled whitish and amethystine (?) blue. I see some bright red leaves on the tupelo contrasting with its glossy green ones. How sweet the fragrance where meadow-hay has been brushed off a load in narrow paths in low woods! The panicked (?) hedysarum apparently will blossom in a week. *Gerardia purpurea* at Forget-me-not Brook. *Eupatorium pubescens*, between this and the first of August.

Aug. 20. That large galium still abundant and in blossom, filling crevices. The *Corallorhiza multiflora*, coral-root (not *odontorhiza*, I think, for it has twenty-four flowers, and its germ is not roundish oval, and its lip is three-lobed), by Brister's Spring. Found by R. W. E., August 12; also *Goodyera pubescens* found at same date. The purple gerardia is very beautiful now in green grass, and the rhexia also, both difficult to get home. I find raspberries still. An aster with a smooth leaf narrowed below, somewhat like *A. amplexicaulis* (or

patens (Gray)?). Is it var. *phlogifolius*? Is that smooth, handsome-stemmed goldenrod in Brown's Sleepy Hollow meadow *Solidago serotina*? Bidens, either *connata* or *cernua*, by Moore's potato-field.

Aug. 21. Weeds in potato-fields are now very rank. What should we come to if the season were longer, and the reins were given to vegetation? Those savages that do not wither before the glance of civilization, that are waiting their turn to be cultivated, preparing a granary for the birds. The air within a day or two is quite cool, almost too cool for a thin coat, yet the alternate days are by some reckoned among the warmest in the year, *scalding* hot. That will apply very well to the greatest heat of August. Young turkeys are straying in the grass, which is alive with grasshoppers.

3 P. M. — To Bear Hill *via* railroad and Flint's.

The bees, wasps, etcetera, are on the goldenrods, impatient to be interrupted, improving their time before the sun of the year sets. A man killed by lightning would have a good answer ready in the next world to the question "How came *you* here?" which he need not hesitate to give. Can that be *Mulgedium leucophæum*, with the aspect of a lettuce but bluish flowers, seven feet high with a panicle two feet by ten inches? Cattails ripe. The common epilobium holds not a neat flower but rich-colored.

Moralists say of men, By their fruits ye shall know them, but botanists say of plants, By their flowers ye shall know them. This is very well generally, but they must make exceptions sometimes when the fruit is fairer than the flower. They are to be compared at that stage in which they are most significant to man. I say that sometimes by their fruits ye shall know them. The bright red or scarlet fruit of the scarlet thorn (*Crataegus coccinea*) in the woods off Bear Hill road, Winn's woods. How handsomely they contrast with the green leaves! Are edible also. Fruits now take the place of flowers to some extent. These brilliant-colored fruits, flower-like. There are few flowers have such brilliant and remarkable colors as the fruit of the arum, trillium, convallarias, dracæna, cornels, viburnums, actæa, etcetera, etcetera I must notice this kind of flowers now.

The leaves of the dogbane are turning yellow. There

are as few or fewer birds heard than flowers seen. The red-eye still occasionally. Agrimony still. "The dry, pearly, and almost incorruptible heads of the Life Everlasting." Ah! this is a truly elysian flower now, beyond change and decay, not lusty but immortal, — pure ascetics, suggesting a widowed virginity. *Bidens frondosa* in corn-fields under Bear Hill, west side. The large kind. *Polygonum arifolium*, a very large scratchweed, in the ditch in Baker's Swamp, reminding me of a boa-constrictor creeping over the plants' stems, a third of an inch in diameter. Some time earlier in this month. The sound of the crickets gradually prevails more and more. I hear the year falling asleep. When dry seeds come, then I hear these dry locust and cricket sounds. Berries are still abundant on Bear Hill, but how late when huckleberries begin to be wormy and pickers are deserting the fields? The high blackberries by the roadside are sweet though covered with dust. At this season, too, the farmers burn brush, and the smoke is added to the haziness of the atmosphere. From this hill I count five or six smokes, far and near, and am advertised of one species of industry over a wide extent of country. The mountains are just visible. The grass-poly by the Lincoln road, with its "fine purple" flowers. *Decodon verticillatus*, swamp loosestrife. Those in the water do not generally bloom. What stout, woody, perennial rootstocks! It is a handsome purple flower, falling over wreath-like on every side, with an epilobium look, a *lively* purple. The *Cardamine hirsuta* still. The bitter-sweet berries now bright red, still handsomer than the flowers. The barberries are turning. Many leaves of the pyrus, both kinds, are red, and some sweet-ferns. See the great umbels, lead-blue, of the *Aralia hispida*.

This coloring and reddening of the leaves toward fall is interesting; as if the sun had so prevailed that even the leaves, better late than never, were turning to flowers, — so filled with mature juices, the whole plant turns at length to one flower, and all its leaves are petals around its fruit or dry seed. A second flowering to celebrate the maturity of the fruit. The first to celebrate the age of puberty, the marriageable age; the second, the maturity of the parent, the age of wisdom, the fullness of years.

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