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Reprinted from the
Wild Ones Journal,
November/December
2006 issue.

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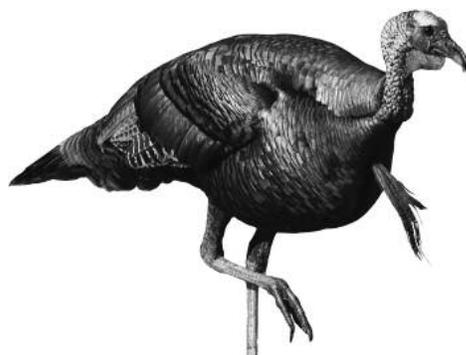
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THE NEXT GENERATION: A Turkey Hunt

By Barbara Bray

Fall is a wonderful season, full of brightly colored leaves and cool crisp days. Children return to school, apples are ripe for the picking, and pumpkins make us think of Halloween jack-o-lanterns. Soon the leaves fall and thoughts turn toward our next holiday, Thanksgiving.

Turkey decorations are everywhere. Turkeys appear by the hundreds in our grocery-store freezers, and children bring home turkey projects made from toilet paper rolls or paper plates. Last year, while in the midst of this turkey overload, I wondered how many plants might be named after turkeys. I could think of only one at that time, turkeyfoot, the native prairie grass, *Andropogon gerardii*. Could there be other "turkey" plants?



As it turned out, there are quite a few interesting native plants with "turkey" in their name. In woods of the eastern United States, you can find turkey claw and turkey tails. Turkey claw is better known as Late Coral Root (*Corallorhiza odontorhiza*). The roots on this flower look like turkey feet, hence the name. If you find turkey tails, you are looking at the fungus, *Trametes versicolor*. Its name, of course, describes the way it looks – like the outspread tail feathers of a male turkey. Turkey corn and turkey peas sound like side dishes for our Thanksgiving table, but don't be fooled. Turkey corn refers to wild bleeding heart (*Dicentra eximia*) and squirrel corn (*D. canadensis*), both of which have small underground bulbs, thought to be favored by wildlife. The turkey pea is *D. canadensis*, named for the pea-like pod holding the seeds.

In the pine barrens of southern New Jersey and south to Florida, you can find turkey beard (*Xerophyllum asphodeloides*), which isn't hairy at all, but showy with a spike of white flowers on a stalk 2 to 5 feet tall. In the sandhills region from Virginia to Florida, grows turkey oak" (*Quercus laevis*). This oak was named for its three-lobed leaves resembling a turkey foot. Acorns from turkey oaks are a major food source for wild turkey as well as other animals.

The western United States has its share of "turkey" plants too. In open dry places along the Pacific coast and further inland, grows a grayish-green plant with starshaped hairs. California native peoples used the

leaves of this plant to stupefy fish in small streams so they could catch them by hand. Wild turkeys and mourning doves congregate to eat the seeds of this same plant. The plant is *Croton setigerus*, also known as *yerba del pescado* (fishweed), dove weed, or turkey mullein. In California, you can find a different turkey pea, which is not to be confused with "turkeypeas." The turkey pea (*Sanicula tuberosa*) is a delicate-looking plant with small clusters of yellow flowers. A member of the carrot family, it grows in openwooded places and gravelly meadows in Oregon and California. Turkeypeas (*Astragalus nuttallianus*), on the other hand, is a member of the bean family, and it grows in semi-desert areas of the Southwest. The small purple flowers of turkeypeas later produce seeds, which quail and turkeys eat. California is also the place to find a patch of "turkey tangle fogfruit" (*Phyla nodiflora*). This mat-like perennial ground cover grows about 3 inches high and has pink to white flowers. Turkey tangle grows throughout much of

the southern United States. Why is it called turkey tangle? I don't know – but isn't it an interesting name?

When I started on this "turkey hunt," my children doubted that I could find plants named after turkeys. My most impressive find was "turkey tangle fogfruit." We laughed about that one for days. We also had an interesting discussion about the confusing common names given to plants. Why was one plant a turkey pea and another turkeypeas? If a plant can have several different common names, how do we really know what is what? I explained to my son Ben how plants have a special Latin name so people can communicate accurately about them. Maybe he doesn't care to know the Latin names of any plants, and that's fine. What I really want for my children is an awareness of the world around them. Maybe spotting a "turkey" outside is just what they need.



Turkeyfoot (*Andropogon gerardii*). Photo by Chris Evans, The University of Georgia, www.forestryimages.org.