

This Week in the Woods September: Week Four

SEPTEMBER: WEEK FOUR



Beggar's ticks



Bigtooth aspen



New England aster



Tachinid fly



Ramp berries



Fly agaric



Heart-leaved American aster



beechnut (American beech)



Royal fern

This Week in the Woods, it's so dry out there. A good time to explore otherwise-soggy cellar holes and other low places.

Several species of unfortunately-named **beggar-ticks** are in bloom. They are asters, but some species lack the outer rays – often inaccurately called petals – that are part of the classic aster

look. These plants prefer to have damp feet, and we found them growing in abundance from the bed of a vernal pool. Later in autumn, beggar-ticks will produce seed heads bristling with tiny hooked burs. At this point, it will be easier to tell which species is which by scrutinizing the number of hooks and shape of the bur. You'll have many opportunities do so as you painstakingly detach them from your socks and pants. Here's a [profile for devil's beggar tick](#), a common species, from the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden's website.

Bigtooth aspen is casting yellow-and-rose tinted leaves to the forest floor. The tree is a close cousin of quaking aspen (which we featured back in May) and shares many of that species' characteristics, such as early successional growing habits and value for a host of different wildlife species, including grouse, which feed on its buds. It's also a valuable cavity nesting tree. Here's a [profile from The Native Plant Trust](#).

Many asters are hard to identify. **New England aster** is a relatively easy one to figure out. In common with New York aster, it can grow very tall (the one in the photo stood at roughly four feet), and its blooms have an especially fluffy appearance because of the high number and crowding of its outer rays. Another indicator is intense color; most purple asters tend to pale lavender shades, but field guides often describe this species' color as magenta. We've noted the importance of asters and goldenrods in [this previous post](#).

Many adult **tachinid flies** (there are thousands of different species) consume nectar and pollen. Their young, however, are meat eaters, and parasitize caterpillars, beetle larvae, and other (mostly larval) insects. Details vary by species but are reliably grisly; a typical scenario involves the fly larvae eating their still-living host from the inside out. Here's a [video from The Caterpillar Lab](#), which is not for the squeamish. One other note about the specific tachinid fly in this photo: its bee-like looks may scare off some predators – a defensive masquerade called Batesian mimicry.

Dried **ramp** heads, topped with berries, are uncommonly pretty. Best to leave them where they are, however – reproduction is tricky enough for these plants without worsening the odds. As explained in [this USDA document](#), which describes steps for cultivating ramps, the seeds need both periods of warmth and cold to germinate, and “from sowing to harvest can take five to seven years.” Here's a link to our [previous April posting about ramps](#), which are also called wild leeks.

Red **fly agaric** mushrooms have a long career of popping up in animated films, children's books and other popular culture venues. The ones you may find growing in the woods are orange and

yellow. They're part of the infamous amanita genus, known for poisonings, and this species is indeed poisonous, although as Mary Holland notes in a [fun post from her *Naturally Curious* blog](#), fly agarics may have been ingested as a pre-raid snack by Vikings. There are other, similar-looking amanita species, such as the (also poisonous) Yellow Patches.

Heart-leaved American aster, which is also called blue wood aster and heartleaf aster, has a foamy look, with many pale bluish-lavender blossoms crowded together. It appears in meadows and woods edges, and is often accompanied by an entourage of small bees. Here's a [profile from The Native Plant Trust](#).

In the Northeast, **American beeches** typically produce nuts in synchronized booms and busts – a tactic that reduces the reproductive success of nut eaters in bust years, and ensures that the trees can overwhelm predator numbers in boom years (“may you be born in a mast year” is surely a chipmunk blessing). The nutlets are packed with fat, and (especially given the absence of American chestnuts) are a valuable autumn food source for bears. Here's an [Outside Story essay by Olivia Box](#) describing the wildlife value of beech. And here's [an interesting research paper](#), co-authored by wildlife officials from several states, describing the impact of beechnut production levels on black bears and marten populations.

Royal fern typically grows in damp soil. Although it isn't evergreen, for the moment it's maintaining its pea green color as many other ferns fade to yellow and brown. Look for a fern that doesn't quite look like a fern, with alternating leaflets well-spaced on each frond. Royal ferns can grow very tall – according to Lynn Levine's excellent field guide, *Identifying Ferns the Easy Way*, they can reach six feet. And here's a [fun fern geek fact](#) to end this week's post: fossil studies suggest that royal ferns haven't changed much in 180 million years, even by fern standards. It's interesting to think that when you look at a stand of them, you may be beholding the same view as a Jurassic era sauropod.

**Northern
Woodlands**

PO Box 270, Lyme, New Hampshire 03768
mail@northernwoodlands.org / 603-795-0660
www.northernwoodlands.org