

Turk's-cap lily showy wildflower

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Turk's-cap lily is a wonderfully fanciful name for the native wildflower *Lilium superbum*. Its curved-back orange petals conjure up images of an exotic turban worn by a snake charmer, or by Ali Baba or some other character out of "Arabian Nights."

The striking appearance of Turk's-cap lily is enhanced by magenta anthers on the ends of long stamens which project down and out below the nodding flower. The petals are decorated with purple speckles. This is not a small plant. Each flower measures about 3 inches across, and the plant can grow up to 6 feet tall, with one to 22 flowers per plant.

Now imagine suddenly coming across one of these beauties on a woods walk. The Turk's-cap lily in the accompanying photograph was a real surprise last summer along the Woodland Trail at Delaware State University. I was thrilled to see this flower for the first time in the 15-plus years that I've walked in this area (I think I actually yelled when I saw it). A nearby large tulip tree had fallen earlier in the year, and maybe the extra sunlight reaching the ground prompted the lily to flower.

This showy wildflower is pollinated by some beautiful butterflies — three species of swallowtail butterflies (eastern tiger, spicebush and pipevine), and great spangled fritillaries. The flower has no scent.

Turk's-cap lily is a Delaware native, ranging from Massachusetts and New Hampshire to Georgia, and growing in wet meadows and low ground. It also makes a lovely garden plant, growing in moist soil in sun or light shade. Turk's-cap lily could be confused with the nonnative tiger lily (*Lilium tigrinum*), but the Turk's-cap lily has a green star at the center (not visible in the accompanying photo), which is not present in the tiger lily.

Relatives of Turk's-cap lily are of conservation concern in Delaware, often due to habitat destruction. Of the three species of lily (*Lilium*) native to Delaware, only the Turk's-cap lily is not rare or extinct in Delaware. The wood lily (*Lilium philadelphicum*), which



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A native Turk's-cap lily (*Lilium superbum*) in spectacular bloom last July, on the Woodland Trail at Delaware State University.

grew in dry open woods in the piedmont, is listed as "conservation concern — extirpated" in the "Flora of Delaware" (McAvoy and Bennett, 2001), which means it's considered extinct in Delaware because its habitat is gone.

The other native lily, Canada lily (*Lilium canadense*), which grows in rich woods and swampy edges in both the piedmont and coastal plain of Delaware, is listed as "conservation concern" (S2), which means that there are only 6 to 20 populations in the state.

Of Delaware's native plant species, approximately 36 percent are now considered rare, and another 12 percent are either historical (not reported for 20 or more years) or extirpated, according to Bill McAvoy of the Delaware Natural Heritage Program. There is an urgent need to preserve or

restore the woodlands which are home to native plants like the Turk's-cap lily.

Delaware was originally mostly forested; approximately 70 percent of these forests are now gone. The need to protect forests and other wild habitats was one of the topics discussed at the recent Delaware Environmental Summit on Jan. 17 in Dover, sponsored by the Delaware Chapter of the Sierra Club.

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, herbarium educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.

Delaware State News, Sunday, February 1, 2009

The Downstate Daily

24

