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736 words

Published in The Christian Science Monitor, May 22, 2002.

The Earliest Flowers of Spring

Spring comes late 8,000 feet up in northern Colorado's Rocky Mountains, where we took care of a Girl Scout ranch. I was alert that spring, ready to answer the question, which flowers bloom first here in the Rockies?

I thought mountain ball cacti were the earliest wildflowers to blossom there, the beautiful, pink, waxy-looking flowers on the small (up to about six inches in diameter), round cacti, nestled into the ground. But Amanda, my daughter, thought pasque flowers, also beautiful, lavender, cup-shaped, fuzzy, not very tall, profuse in the area, might be the earliest blooming. Neither of us was sure. We were both willing to be wrong.

We walked up the driveway to the closest area of mountain ball cacti. We looked down at the highway, but we stood far enough above it, only the most alert riders in cars saw us up there that cold and windy day.

I said, "This should be a good place for early blooming, because all this rock holds some heat."

"But that pine tree shades the area part of the day."

"Yes."

"No signs of developing flowers, yet."

Two weeks later, I left my desk and walked through camp. Amanda was in school that day. Pasque flowers bloomed under trees and along the dirt road. Sun shone, and then clouds covered the sun. Wind rose. Clouds blew across the sky, and the sun shone again and then disappeared behind moving clouds.

I left the road and walked through open meadow, then into pine forest. Pasque flowers stood, their petals tightly closed, among rocks. As I watched, sun shone again. Pasque flowers opened their petals into their cup-shaped form and turned to face the sun. Clouds obscured the sun again, and the flowers closed their petals tight and protected the inside of the flowers.

I was fascinated by the changing flowers. I knew some flowers opened for sunshine and closed for a cloudy sky, but I never watched it happen before. The open flowers began to close for lack of sunshine. Were they disappointed in the day,

too cold? I crouched close to them, but out of the way of their sunshine.

Clouds moved and allowed the sun to shine. Warmth burst on the world. The pasque flowers opened. I watched a performance. What emerged wasn't music for my ears, but color for my eyes, a quiet dance. This dance of life responded to sunshine, one of the forces that feed life.

Close to the dancing pasque flowers, I saw small white flowers with yellow centers, close to the ground, and tiny, very light pink flowers gripping decomposing granite tightly, but neither of those flowers responded to the appearing and disappearing sun the way pasque flowers did.

I stayed there through more than a dozen changes from bright, warm sunshine, to sun occluded by dense clouds, from flowers open to warm sunshine, to flowers closed and protecting their centers from winter-like conditions. Time became irrelevant. I had entered a magical world that revealed mysteries of existence to me.

I thought I could stay there, days and nights, unsheltered, sharing spring with flowers. When I had been there long enough, they would tell me their names, not the names of types, pasque, daisy, mountain ball cacti, given them by lumbering-above-them humans, but individual names, soft, petally, of delicate smells and widely varied colors, shy as spring sun behind densely blowing grey clouds.

But human voices and duties of the day called me. I woke to the world around me, stood, and walked away, leaving pasque flowers open to sun that shone through the rest of that day. I walked up to the rocky place above the highway and found more than a dozen mountain ball cacti flowers reflecting sunshine in beautiful colors. I crouched close to them and looked at them for a while. Then I walked home by a circuitous route and found other kinds of flowers in bloom, greeting spring.

I never did answer the question, which flower blooms first? It doesn't matter if I never answer that question. I found answers to several questions I never thought to ask. I found images of beautiful flowers of a dozen kinds and of dancing pasque flowers to fill my mind with beauty as I drift toward sleep. I found delicate flowers that I would find again and again when I walked through forest and meadow on another partly-cloudy spring day.