

Chautauqua Watershed Notes  
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy  
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Old Fields Provide Beauty and Benefits to the Watershed  
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For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



As you drive around Chautauqua County this fall, marveling at the beauty and kaleidoscope of color that the waning summer warmth brings, take a moment to notice those plants that blossom late and provide the last resources for the coming winter. Even from the car window, it is hard to miss the saffron color of goldenrod that contrasts so nicely with the palette of lavenders and pinks produced by a variety of asters and other fall perennials.

Ecologists call vacant farmlands and other abandoned clearings, often filled with a rich mixture of grasses and wildflowers, “old fields”, and they are studied for the clues they offer in analyzing patterns of natural plant establishment and plant community changes. Those plants that are able to colonize and thrive in old fields are determined, in part, by the underlying geology: the physical characteristics including the soil and water that is available to plant propagules that are present at or arrive in the area.

In wetter fields, you will most often see lavender Joe Pye weed, which contrasts pleasingly with the off-white boneset. In less disturbed areas, turtlehead may be present also, with its odd spike

of tubular white flowers barely tinged with pink. A non-native invader of wetlands, purple loosestrife, did particularly well this year due to our wet summer, and though it is beautiful, it is quick to destroy our natural biodiversity through aggressive colonization.

In drier fields, goldenrod often dominates and is freckled by pastel asters and the white of the non-native species Queen Anne's lace. Speaking of goldenrod - not all are made alike. The New York Flora Atlas has recorded nine species in Chautauqua County alone and at least a dozen more in other parts of the state, and although many of these prefer drier sites, some are adapted to wetlands including bogs, and others to shady environments such as forests.

Aside from the obvious beauty of these old fields, they provide other valuable functions in the watershed. The late-blooming plants often present in old fields provide critical late-season food and shelter for pollinators, insuring a healthy next generation, which will assist in pollinating our spring crops and native species. Seeds also provide a valuable resource for a variety of wildlife species and linger on the standing plants through much of winter. Colonizers of old fields quickly stabilize recently disturbed soils and improve the quality of water entering our streams and lakes in a way that lawns are incapable of doing. For these and other reasons, some institutions have incorporated old fields into their landscaping by simply ceasing or minimizing mowing little used fields or strips bordering roads or woodlands. You can easily incorporate a native old field species into your landscape if you like. A favorite of mine is New England aster, which you may have seen along the Chautauqua Lake shoreline near the Village of Mayville's Park. This species produces brilliant purple flowers, is easily grown from seed and available commercially, and is an excellent substitute for non-native chrysanthemums, which are so popular this time of year.

One of the potential current threats to alteration of old fields is the recent resurgence in oil and gas exploration. Many leases involve private landowners and do not undergo public review for potential environmental consequences. I don't mean to assert we should not take advantage of these natural resources, which we are lucky enough to have within our own lands, I just hope that the parties involved will keep best management practices in mind in order to minimize any potential damage to our region's other valuable resources. These include commonsense measures to minimize ground disturbance and control sediment runoff from disturbed grounds in order to foster watershed health for the benefit of all.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake's shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its 2008 annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake's most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. It is the only local organization conserving lands in perpetuity for these purposes. Please contact the Conservancy at 664-2166 to join for 2008!