The Changing Native Flora of Needham

Summer is finally here! The weather is getting hot, school is out, and everyone’s schedules relax a little. The elegant pansies that we love so much in Needham are giving way to the lush growth of our summer garden. Gardens are highly structured environments, and we choose our plantings for color, height, and season of bloom. But I am, deep in my heart, a weed person, more interested in the sprouts that grow without our help (or despite or hindrance).

The Needham History Center has an interesting collection of 19th century plant samples, mostly of the uncultivated variety. Needham botanists have made important contributions to the history of our local plants.

Systematic collection of native plants in Needham began in the 1830s, with the work of Dr. Josiah Noyes (1801-1871). Dr. Noyes was the town’s physician, but was also a natural scientist in the broad, 19th century sense – chemist, botanist, geologist, zoologist, and geographer.

Noyes’ friend and protégé, Timothy Otis Fuller, continued the work into the early 20th century, adding greatly to Noyes’ plant collections and observations. Together, their work forms the largest systematic local collection of New England flora. Most of it is now housed in the Harvard Herbaria, but the Needham History Center has notebooks and some of their pressed collections.
Fuller (1845-1916) conducted a survey of the Needham plants in 1885. He identified 691 species, of which 563 were native to New England. He noted, however, that even in his lifetime the town had changed, and that an increase in suburban development had already caused the extinction of several species that he and Noyes had collected previously.

Indeed, Fuller lived in a time of rapid ecological transition. Most of New England had been largely deforested by the mid-1800s. 19th-century paintings of Needham, as well as early maps and photos, show a cleared landscape of fields and meadows. Modern views of these scenes show significant regrowth of the tree cover. In Fuller’s time, the landscape was still changing; the decline of farming in favor of mercantilism and manufacturing, soon to be followed by the local transition to a suburban residential community, favored this process of modest reforestation. Thus the Needham landscape that Fuller knew was different even from Noyes’ day, and much different from the one we know today.

A similar survey of the Needham flora was undertaken in 2003 by Dr. Lisa Standley, an environmental consultant and a former member of the Needham Conservation Commission. Her data show a clear decline in native species – 248 of the species recorded by Fuller, nearly 44%, have since been lost. Of the survivors, nearly 43% are considered rare or at risk. The greatest percentage of loss was among the ferns and orchids.

Once again, these changes can be attributed to modern development. As Needham’s farm economy declined, grassland and pasture were converted for residential development. Drainage, filling, and control of Needham’s abundant ponds and streams turned the wet meadows and bogs into dry building lots.

Although demographic and economic changes continue to alter the natural landscape of Needham, we are fortunate to have several significant properties that serve as refuges for native wildlife. So take advantage of the lazy summer days, for a walk around our town to observe and appreciate these valued resources!

### Places to See Native Plants in Needham

There are several town- or state-managed properties in Needham that preserve local wildlife. Many have trails that provide easy access while minimizing intrusion into sensitive habitats.

#### Town-owned Properties

- Ridge Hill, Town Forest, Farley Pond, Eastman Conservation Area

#### State-Managed Properties

- Cutler Pond [https://www.mass.gov/locations/cutler-park-reservation](https://www.mass.gov/locations/cutler-park-reservation)
- Hemlock Gorge [https://www.mass.gov/locations/hemlock-gorge-reservation](https://www.mass.gov/locations/hemlock-gorge-reservation)
- Charles River Peninsula [www.thetrustees.org/places-to-visit/greater-boston/charles-river-peninsula.htm](http://www.thetrustees.org/places-to-visit/greater-boston/charles-river-peninsula.htm)
What's Next?

We have plans for the summer – oh, yes, we do! But we don’t have all of the details ...yet!

Please join our mailing list or watch our website, www.needhamhistory.org for updates and news through the summer.

Our new Membership year is here!

We look forward to seeing you at many more lectures, author talks and outings this coming year. Don’t miss a single thing – you can renew your membership today online at www.needhamhistory.org/memberships

Welcome to our new members:

Janice Berns        Steve & Stephanie Dewey
Christine Burns     Bill & Susan Laurence
Bob & Pat DeNoble   Teri & Steve Boardman
Michael Crawford    Rick & Kathy Scranton
Paul Siegenthaler  Stan & Karen Steinberg

PS - Your membership will expire on June 30th so don't delay!

Annual Pansy Day Festival a Fun Day Out

Families, members and friends enjoyed a day out together back in April to celebrate Spring and Needham's official flower - the Pansy! A plant sale, workshops, pony rides and yummy food from the bake sale saw the house full of visitors all day.

The Needham History Center thanks our annual partner The Needham Bank, as well as event sponsors Avita of Needham and the Noanett Garden Club for their support of this annual tradition.

We note with great sadness that John H. Cogswell passed away on June 1st. Jack was a member of the Needham History Center for decades, and served for many years as a member of its Board of Directors, and as a Trustee. His most important contribution was the establishment of an Endowment Fund, to assure the History Center's long-term financial stability. Jack also served the Town in many ways, as a member of numerous boards and committees, and as a Selectman. Jack's expertise, generosity, and dedication benefited the whole town.

The Needham History Center offers its sincere condolences to Jack's daughters, Katie and Julie, and their families. We are so grateful for his support and counsel, and we will miss him.
So, where can you buy Needham Gifts?

Here, of course!

We have a large selection of unique Needham-related gifts, including Books, DVDs, Ornaments, and Note Cards.

**BOOKS:** Images of America: Needham, The Baker Estate

**DVDs:** Beautiful & Bizarre, Big Little Town, Return to Norumbega, The Millen-Faber Gang

**Note Cards:** Fuller Birds, Wyeth Pansies, Victorian Needham

**Ornaments:** Town Hall, the Blue Tree, the Town Seal, Memorial Park, and our newest addition – Echo Bridge!

And you never know what Treasures you will find in our **Heirloom Shop**

Shop Tuesday – Thursday, 10am to 3pm
or Online at [www.needhamhistory.org/shop](http://www.needhamhistory.org/shop)

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