Ghost Plants of Waterloo

Each year in Waterloo, three ghostly-pale plants emerge from the forest floor. They lack green pigment. They are parasitic, making their living at the expense of their leafy green neighbors. The first, called squawroot (right), emerges in May. Its roots are attached to and draw nourishment from the roots of nearby oak trees. The only part of the plant visible above ground is a flower stalk that resembles a pale pinecone. Although it does not need sunlight for growth, it does depend on insects for pollination. Once pollinated, seed capsules are formed. As the seed capsules dry, they spill their seeds onto the ground where they sprout. The sprouts send roots into the ground, that seek out and attach to tree roots. Squawroot is found along the lowland woods and beech woods trials.

Squawroot as it appears in May (above left) and in Sept. (above right).

Indian pipe (left) gets its nutrients from a "middle man." A fungus gains nutrients by attaching to tree roots. The Indian pipe then gains its nutrients by attaching to the fungus. The Indian pipe gives nothing in return making it a true parasite. Indian pipe grows 4 to 10 inches tall. Each stem has a single flower which faces down at first, and then straightens up after pollination.

A nice colony of Indian pipe is found along the beech woods trail, just across the bridge on the way to the bog. It usually appears in June and has largely disappeared by September.

September and October are the best times to see beech-drops. They are common, but somewhat inconspicuous, and are found under the American beech trees along the beech woods trail. They are parasitic on the roots of American beech.

Beech-drops grow 4 to 18 inches tall. Their stems (far right) are cream, tan or purple striped, but turn brown as they age. Their attractive blossoms (near right) are striped with purple, but are small and best viewed with a hand lens.

Most beech-drops can be found under the beech trees and within six to ten feet of the trunk. Look closely, as they are not particularly showy.