



Forest Frights

By Greg Podniesinski and Chris Firestone

Halloween is fast approaching, and our forests have some inhabitants that are downright spooky. One that immediately comes to mind is bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), aptly named for its root color and appearance of oozing blood when broken. *Sanguis* is Latin for blood, but in bloodroot is a poisonous resin. The herbal uses and folklore associated with this plant range from a cancer cure to an aphrodisiac.*



Bloodroot flowers in the spring



Bloodroot root broken showing the red oozing resin



Jack-o-lantern mushrooms (*Omphalotus illudens*) are orange, just like their pumpkin counterparts. Unlike their vegetable namesake, they grow in the woods on tree stumps, are bioluminescent, and poisonous.

Jack-o-lantern mushrooms on a stump

**This information is for historical reference only and does not constitute medical advice.*

A witch's broom is a deformity of a dense mass of shoots and twigs developed from a stressor to the plant. This symptom can be caused by fungus, bacteria, nematodes, mites, or viruses affecting many different trees and shrubs. Folklore describes these anomalies as places where witches would rest in trees.



Witch's broom on Hackberry.

Photo credit: Whitney Cranshaw, Colorado State University, Bugwood.org



Witch hazel

Speaking of witches, witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) is a small native tree that is blooming now in PA woods. Look for the beautiful flowers that look like yellow spiders. Witch hazel branches were historically used as a "witching stick" to find underground water sources by pointing down when approaching the source.

Looking like the beginning of the zombie apocalypse, deadman's fingers fungi resemble rotting fleshy fingers emerging from damp, often moss-covered forest soil. Varying in color from white to dark gray, these are the fruiting bodies of the fungus *Xylaria polymorpha*. Feeding on dead and dying trees, wood-rotting fungi like deadman's fingers play an important role in the breakdown of woody material in the forest and recycling nutrients (sort of like forest zombies – feeding on the dead... Trees, that is).



Photo credit: Charismatic Planet.



"*Deadman's Fingers*" by [Travis S.](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).

The devil's walking stick (*Aralia spinosa*) is a prickly native, having viciously sharp spines on the main stem, twigs, and even the leaves. A shrub to small tree, the devil's walking stick can be an attractive addition to the landscape, but it is definitely an example of "look, but don't touch!"



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"*Spiny Aralia leaf at Cross Estate Gardens, New Jersey*" by [Vilseksogen](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).

Corpse bindweed (*Fallopia dumentorum*), also known as black bindweed, presumably got its grim name as a result of being found in the stomach of the Tollund Man, a 2,000-year-old, well-preserved "bog man" found in a British peatland. Considered an invasive species in North America, it's in the buckwheat family and thought the Tollund Man ate a gruel made of corpse bindweed seeds before he was ritually sacrificed, and his body later dumped in the local bog... grim indeed.



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"Silkeborg - Tollund man" by [JeroenVN](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC 2.0](#).

The Northeast and Midwest US are home to a number of other plants and fungi with Halloween-appropriate names (some native, others unwelcome "guests"), including destroying angel, deadly angelica, carrion-flower, Devil's-bit, nightshade, poison hemlock, scorpion weed, skeleton weed, spider-flower, toadshade, and wormwood. Beware, be very aware!