



A profusion of native wildflowers herald spring and summer in Penn's Woods. Chief among them is the evergreen Mountain laurel, *Kalmia latifolia*.

Governor Gifford Pinchot decided the choice of the official State flower in the 1930s. The General Assembly had passed two bills each naming a different favorite shrub-(Mountain laurel and the Pink azalea). Governor Pinchot chose the former and signed the bill into law on May 5, 1933.

Mountain laurel in Pennsylvania normally begins to bloom late in May and its pink and white blossoms are in evidence well into June. Thousands of tourists from the Commonwealth and surrounding states are attracted to the mountains each spring to view this colorful display.

Mountain laurel is a member of the heath family (*Ericaceae*). This family of plants contains many of our most common and best-known shrubs including huckleberries, blueberries, azaleas, cranberries and rhododendron.



Mountain laurel varies from four to ten feet in height, although specimens 40 feet tall are found in some southern states. It is commonly found growing on rocky hilltops.

Its leaves are lance-shaped, glossy and dark green in color, three to four inches long, and are leather-like in texture. They resemble the leaves of the rhododendron but generally are smaller in size. It is one of a few broadleaved plants native to Pennsylvania whose leaves are evergreen and do not fall to the ground during the winter months.

Two close relatives of *Kalmia latifolia* are also native to Pennsylvania - Sheep laurel, *K. angustifolia* and Bog laurel, *K. polifolia*. Sheep laurel flowers in June and July in woodlands of the eastern third of the State. Bog laurel, as its name implies is limited to sphagnum bogs. It is a rare inhabitant of the northeastern corner of Pennsylvania but is more common in the New England states and across Canada.



Mountain laurel is distributed throughout most of the State's wooded hillsides. It is particularly abundant in the mountainous sections and is used extensively as ornamental shrubbery. In the garden Mountain laurel requires cool, moist, well-drained soil. It will grow in full sun or deep shade but flowers best in sunnier locations. There are over 75 named cultivars of *Kalmia latifolia* in the nursery trade.

There is a persistent myth that the designation of State flower affords Mountain laurel a protected status. This is not true. No one may remove any plant from public or private land without the landowner's or land manager's permission. But there are no legal restrictions on the cultivation of Mountain laurel. And there are many good reasons to grow and enjoy Pennsylvania's beautiful State flower.