

SIGNS OF SPRING STROLL

**GARFIELD PARK
CONSERVATORY
ALLIANCE** 

Winter in Chicago can be long but we've finally noticed some signs of spring while we go on walks in our neighborhoods and are so excited for the change of seasons. This resource has some signs of spring we've spotted recently. The next time you and your family go out for an adventure, see if you can spot any of these clues that warmer weather is coming!



On this forest floor snowdrops are some of the first flowers to come out in the spring. Photo by Irina Iriser

BULB FLOWERS & SNOWDROPS

Why can these plants grow so early in the spring? The secret to the early bloom of bulb flowers is its bulb! Many early spring flowers have bulbs, like tulips, daffodils, and crocuses. Bulbs are an underground short stem, covered in thick leaf scales all packed tight together. These thick leaves store food and energy reserves for the plant all winter, getting them ready for spring. Most bulbs start in the spring by putting out above-ground leaves. You can see a lot of different bulbs around the city sending up leaves right now, which look like thick, curled bundles of green or reddish spikes! After they've put out enough leaves, the plant flowers, then goes back to making even more leaves to gather enough food and energy for next winter.

Keep an eye out for snowdrops in yards, parks, and wooded areas all over the city, sometimes poking up through the snow itself! Snowdrops are an especially tough early spring plant—in fact, some open their flowers before even the vernal equinox, or the first day of spring. They are small and low to the ground, with hanging white buds and patches of green on their inner petals, surrounded by thin green leaves. Snowdrops are originally from Europe, and in the original German version of the story, Snow White is sometimes called Snowdrop!

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- What do you notice about the flowers you find on your stroll?
- What kind of spring flower would you be?

PRECOCIOUS TREES & SILVER MAPLES

In the spring, you may have noticed that some plants open their flowers before they've opened any of their leaves! The botanical term for these plants is "precocious." This is the same word we use for kids who learn things, like reading, earlier than expected. It is just as surprising to see a four year old reading a chapter book, as it is to see a tree in the snow with colorful flowers and no leaves! One of these precocious plants you'll find in Chicago is the silver maple.

These flowers don't quite look like ordinary flowers. Because it is so early in spring, most insect pollinators are not active yet, and many bird pollinators are still overwintering in warmer areas. Therefore, this plant doesn't need to show off like other flowers to attract these animals. Instead, it is wind-pollinated! Flowers are usually male or female. The male flowers have little tassels called anthers, with pom-poms of pollen at the ends. When the wind shakes the flowers, it blows the pollen from the male flowers into the female flowers, where little red tentacles called pistils can collect it! Once this happens, the flower can turn into a seed, which we will see at the beginning of summer.



Silver maple branches from farther away look like this. Photo by Jeremy Sell



A close up of silver maple flowers. Photo by Larry Weber

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- What else do you notice about the trees you see on your stroll?
- What do you think are some ways you can tell trees apart even when they don't have leaves?
- Are there other plants you notice with precocious flowers?

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRDS RETURN



The characteristic red patches on a male's wings make it an easy bird to identify even for novice bird-watchers. Photo by Phil Kahler



A female red-winged blackbird perching on some cattails. Photo by Lewnanny Richardson

If you live near a wetland or marshy area, you've definitely seen these birds! The males are all black, except for red and yellow shoulder patches on their wings, and they are very loud and rowdy! Over the winter, most of the city's red-winged blackbirds migrate south, to spend time in the Southern United States or Central America. But recently we've seen them in trees at Humboldt Park! They're back from their winter holiday.

Female Red-Winged Blackbirds are several shades of brown, spotted and striped to blend in with the winter plants. Instead of trying to show off, like the males, the females are trying to blend in. They normally build their nests over water, in cattails and rushes, and have to stay at the nest to incubate their eggs. If they were brightly colored, predators would know right where to find them and their nests! Males also help keep the babies safe by standing guard at the nesting site, and will even scold and chase animals that get too close. When you're observing these birds, make sure to give them plenty of space.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

- Are there other birds or animals you see on your spring stroll?
- Sometimes it can be hard to see a bird, but it's easy to hear them. Do you hear any bird or animal sounds on your walk? What do the sounds remind you of?

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE!

Post about your adventures and tag us at @gpconservatory or use the hashtag "#GPCatHome"!



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