

Nature Notes

Leaving Home



Imagine you produced thousands of offspring but that neither you nor your offspring had muscles so all the offspring lived in your house, using your food and water, and competing with you ---- for their entire lives. Not a happy picture but that is exactly the problem plants face every year during the reproductive season, how to disperse their seeds.

Plants like mountain blueberries, thimbleberries, and strawberries entice animals into eating their fruit and hence distributing the seeds over a wide area. Coyotes and bears eat and distribute seeds from rose hips from the wild rose in early winter. Some conifers use squirrels or the Clark's Nutcracker to spread and even bury their seeds. Grasses get chipmunks and mice to gather and distribute their seeds for them. Having edible fruit means very effective dispersal but if the dispersing animals don't appear then the plant is in trouble.

Maples and conifers with winged seeds, as well as plants like the cottonwood tree with their seeds encased in fluff use wind to do the work and hence can disperse their young over very long distances.

Some grasses, as well as members of the burdock group, have hooked seeds designed to catch in the fur or feathers of animals and then be dropped wherever the animal grooms itself or where we pick those pesky burrs out of our socks.



**Wind Carried Seeds
of the Yellow Salsify**

(Photo L Duncan)

Some plants use a more violent approach. Parasitic mistletoes shoot their seeds at a significant velocity, as do the vetches and lupines. On hot summer days one may often hear a faint crackling sound as the latter expel seeds from their seed pods using a built in spring action. Plants do pay a penalty for using wind or ballistic dispersal as both mechanisms restrict the size of the seeds and the amount of stored food provided for the start of the next generation.

Trembling Aspen do produce small seeds but the seeds seldom germinate successfully. Instead aspens send up new shoots from the outer roots of the parent group. They are most likely to do this after a disturbance such as fire. Wild strawberries use horizontal stems to spread just in case their fruit is not attractive enough. Many grasses back up their seed distribution in this same slow but reliable way.

Plants have solved the problem of seed dispersal in a variety of creative ways in order to minimize competition between offspring and parent while occupying newly available habitat.

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