

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

Winter is not without its flowers. When the rows of spring daffodils fade like mist into the rainbow abundance of summer blooms, when the sunflowers have become a harvest of seeds and autumn gardens begin hibernating, frost flowers emerge. Amidst the yellow-brown foliage, they are pure white and subtle, rarely seen and fleeting. Only the lucky few who happen to be out looking for them in just the right weather will find them dancing in place along the ground.

Or the person who thinks someone littered white packing material in the road or garden and has the heart to return with a trash bag to pick up the pieces. They'll be rewarded with impossible-to-hold frozen tendrils of ice, woven and wrapped around stems of vascular plants like frostweed or yellow ironweed.

As a separate phenomena from window frost or sea ice flowers, Wikipedia lists several other names for frost flowers: frost faces, ice castles, ice blossoms and more. They can't form unless the weather cooperates. If the ground is moist but unfrozen, a freeze hits, and the stems of the right plants haven't been cut, frost flowers can paint a picture of a wintery fairy ballroom with petal-like dresses flowing around the dancers. This is made possible when the stem cracks during the first freeze or in early winter. As the watery sap in the stem expands from the cold, it seeps through the cracks and freezes upon contact with air, forming new layers like petals as the sap continues to flow.

They don't last long, becoming water vapor or melting in the sun quickly after forming, unless the stems are located in a shady spot. The easiest way to find them is to locate the right types of plant stems, note their location, and visit early in the morning after the first frost of the year (or even the second or third frosts, if at first you don't succeed). But if you're not sure which plants can form these flowers, or lack a garden, just walking around the neighborhood or driving along gravel roads and looking for places which are rarely mowed should be enough for you to witness these flowers in person.

The Ozarks appear to be a perfect place to find frost flowers. In 2016, the weather channel reported on frost flowers at Devil's Den State Park, which were photographed and posted to Twitter by Hunter Mays. Wikipedia provides photographs of frost flowers from the Ozark region. They're mentioned by the Missouri Department of Conservation. And this writer has witnessed them many years in a row near Fayetteville. So they may be rare, but at least we live in a great place to have a chance to see them at a time of year when most of us need a little encouragement to brave the cold and keep exploring the outdoors.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.