



NH Outside

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On the Edge

By Jackie Bower, UNH Cooperative Extension Master Gardener

I joined an elite group this year: Roadies. Roadies with a cause. I trained with my local high school cycling team to meet the New Hampshire Firefighters Challenge of biking from the Canadian border to the seacoast: 250 miles the last weekend in June. It's a fund-raiser for the Muscular Dystrophy Association and a personal challenge for the individuals who participate.

Traveling on the edge of New Hampshire roads by bicycle is a challenge all by itself, a challenge for neither the faint of heart nor weak of knee. First, there's sharing the road with motorized vehicles; a major intimidation. Next, the condition of the roads. Riding on two thin wheels means paying close attention to the details. And finally, the geography. We Granite-Staters are more likely to use the term "flat" to describe a paint texture than our terrain: "Would you like that Mountain Moss in semi-gloss or flat?" Elevation changes continuously and often significantly.

The need to keep a close watch on the road somewhat negates enjoying the scenery. Riding on the edge, I become acutely aware of the condition of our roads. Perhaps this year is even worse than usual because of all the rain. Dirt washed onto the road makes conditions slippery for bikers, and dirt washed away from shoulders leaves us no place to go. Everybody using the roadways notices uneven and broken pavement, but drivers are less likely to spot the cracks that run parallel to the edge and spell certain disaster for any cyclist who catches a tire in a narrow opening.

Aside from the physical conditions, there are plenty of other hazards along the road. I've seen things I probably wouldn't have noticed from my car, but that forced me to move quickly to avoid them on my bike. Small rocks, broken glass, strips of metal, bolts, bent nails, and even tools can lead to flat tires if hit. Other debris includes trash, tree branches and road-kill. Sadly, one of the few rabbits I've seen in New Hampshire lay flattened on the edge of the road.

Speaking of dead animals, cycling is an olfactory experience. The smell of the air can't be missed when you're speeding through it. For the most part, it's pleasant. Honeysuckle is one of my spring favorites, followed by lilacs and wild roses. Fresh-cut grass and fabric softener remind me of chores left back home, and the smell of back-yard barbecues helps me pedal faster toward supper. Then there are the olfactory assaults: freshly-fertilized farmland, recently battered skunks and burning cigarettes.

Those of us “sucking air” as we ascend steep terrain end up tasting some of the things we smell. The acrid taste of exhaust from rapidly accelerating vehicles is particularly unpleasant. Dust and dirt are probably the most common things we roadies ingest. We also take in our share of insects.

What do bugs taste like? I try to spit out the intruders or swallow them immediately if they’ve gone to the back of the throat. However, I attended a workshop recently where the instructor mentioned that he chomped down on a fly once and he thought it tasted like blueberries.

What with poor soil, automobile pollution, and winter salt, only the heartiest plants can survive along the edge of the road. My favorites: violets, buttercups, Queen Anne’s lace, daisy, black-eyed Susan, daylily, forget-me-not, and chicory, to name a few. Their colors run the spectrum of the rainbow, decorating the otherwise drab corridor of pavement. As I pedaled through Sugar Hill during the MDA bike ride, I remembered the town’s reputation for lupines and, sure enough, I saw some lovely blue ones along the road.

The plant I notice most while riding, perhaps because it causes me the greatest anxiety, is poison ivy. I have seen vast tracts of lush, green, healthy plants, growing in full sun and dense shade. The leaves may be quite large or rather small; some are shiny, others dull. Poison ivy grows close to the road, up trees and along fences. I’ve seen an enormous plant arched across a guardrail so close to the road that an unknowing pedestrian or cyclist trying to stay clear of traffic is likely to have brushed by or pushed the poison ivy out of the way.

Insects cause a few problems for cyclists beyond the inhalation and ingestion factors. Like any sweaty, warm-blooded pedestrian, when we stop, we become magnets for black flies and mosquitoes. Unlike the other biting insects, deer flies are exceptional drafters and sprinters, tough to outpace. I can’t resist the urge to swat and have nearly tumbled off my bike on many occasions trying to whack a deer fly. The only times I’ve succeeded in nailing one is when it’s already bitten through my pants.

As a Master Gardener, I need to volunteer at least fifteen hours a year to maintain my active membership status. I fantasize that the volunteer coordinators will accept my swatting, rolling over, inhaling, and swallowing these insect pests when I bike as service to the community.