

# Native Plants in Silver Falls State Park

A timely inquiry leads to a dream commission

STORY BY Gillian Rice  
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Irish native **Aislinn Adams** trained in graphic design and worked as a freelance designer for the Irish National Parks and Monuments Service, focusing on historical buildings. She has always loved the outdoors, history, illustration, and interpretation. A project on historical landscapes working alongside a botanist led Aislinn to study horticulture at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, in Dublin. She then moved to the US and lives in Oregon. During a return visit to the National Botanic Gardens in 2012, a former teacher asked Aislinn to give a talk to the newly-formed Irish Society of Botanical Artists (ISBA). This fortuitous connection, and an introduction through ISBA member Shevaun Doherty to Oregon Botanical Artists (OBA) member Janene Walky, led Aislinn to redirect her career to botanical art. Soon a serendipitous meeting led to an exciting commission from the Friends of Silver Falls State Park. Aislinn, an active OBA member, remains in contact with her Irish botanical artist friends, and teaches at her local art store and other venues.

**I F YOU HAD VISITED SILVER FALLS STATE PARK** in Oregon not long ago, you might have spotted someone lying on her stomach drawing a diminutive slipper orchid. Although Aislinn Adams has permission to pick sample specimens of some plants she is illustrating in the park, the slipper orchid is not one of them.

In 2015, armed with samples of her botanical art greeting cards, Aislinn visited the Nature

Store at the South Falls area of Silver Falls State Park, the largest and “crown jewel” of Oregon’s state parks. The store seemed a promising sales opportunity because the park attracts over a million visitors annually. The friendly shop assistant, a volunteer with the Friends of Silver Falls (FOSF), asked

Hiking the Canyon Trail, Silver Falls State Park, Oregon



Aislinn to contact the administrator. Not only were the FOSF interested in selling her cards, they had a project for her—to illustrate 30 native plants for identification sheets to be displayed in South Falls Lodge. Her brief: create illustrations for ordinary people who would like to discover native plants.

The sheets would replace the old set of herbarium specimens visitors could examine to learn about native flora. A generous bequest from Maroe Brown, a long-time FOSF volunteer and native plant enthusiast, enabled the botanical illustration project.

“It’s not often that one gets the opportunity and funding to really get to know a plant subject,” said Aislinn. “I am able to study and record a plant’s growing stages and, most importantly, to observe it in its natural habitat.”

First she had to locate the plants and in June 2015, Silver Falls State Park was beginning to experience its worst drought on record. Undaunted, recalling the Irish proverb, “a good start is half the work,” Aislinn set out. “The more you can sketch outdoors, the better it is,”

she emphasizes. “It’s also practical to press specimens. When I do this, I can observe how one stem joins another, the shape of the stem, and how the bud emerges. I can see the structure and the fine details such as serration on the edge of a leaf.” Aislinn takes reference photos, too, but finds their use limited.

Aislinn made her own sketchbooks for the project. In spring, she tries to enter all information about her subjects into them. Many subjects are spring ephemerals. A park ranger friend, Matt Palmquist, lets her know where plants are blooming. She draws in pen and ink later. This means she can continue working in the winter.

“I very much enjoyed illustrating the monkeyflower,” she relates. “Matt gave me one in a pot when it was blooming. So many of the plants I am illustrating are tiny. It’s great to have one I can place at eye level. I spent several days drawing it on my deck.”

It’s advantageous that, 19 years ago, Aislinn converted her yard into a native landscape where several of the project’s plants grow. Nevertheless, she checks these same plants in the park to ensure that her specimens represent the species well. As a mountaineer and hiker, she climbs higher in the nearby Cascade Mountains, where some flowers still remain on species that have finished blooming at lower elevations. “The biggest hassle is the mosquitoes,” she notes. “I always have to use insect repellent.” When she hikes alone, she takes bear spray in case she meets bears or mountain lions, which are present but rarely encountered. Because of dry summer conditions that are worsening across the western US, she also is cautious about fire risk.

A few years since she received her dream commission from the park, Aislinn is working on plant specimen number 21. A challenge is the time it takes to study and document each plant. She’s been working on salal for about four years. “I wish I could work faster,” she says. “I love the project and it’s an important commitment, but I must focus on it to the exclusion of other art projects.”



A retired professor, **Gillian Rice** grew up in England. She lives in Phoenix where she enjoys painting, writing, gardening, and learning about the natural world. Gillian serves as ASBA’s Board Secretary.



Aislinn was able to use some of the pen and ink illustrations she had done for 10 years for *The Washington Post’s* weekly Digging In column. She colored these digitally but prefers to use watercolor, which she is now doing exclusively. “I discovered that coloring digitally took longer than watercolor by hand!” she explained. “Also, I prefer to do watercolor. I did the inside-out plant in watercolor—and it means I can enter my paintings into Oregon Botanical Artists and ASBA exhibitions. I retain the originals and the copyrights to my work—the park will have prints and digital copies of my identification sheets.”

Aislinn will produce cards and prints of her work for sale and will put on an exhibition of all the identification sheets. It might be possible to create a native plant guidebook. And perhaps she might lead a field sketching workshop for park visitors. The completion of the illustration project is just another “good start.”

**TOP** Gaultheria shallon, salal, sketchbook page, 15 x 11 in, graphite and watercolor, ©2015-2019. **MIDDLE** Vancouveria hexandra, inside-out flower, ID sheet, 16 x 11 in, pen and ink with watercolor, ©2019. **MIMULUS** guttatus, monkeyflower, sketchbook study, 10 x 8.5 in, graphite and watercolor, ©2018 **OPPOSITE PAGE** Lysichiton americanus, Western skunk cabbage, ID sheet, 16 x 11 in, pen and ink with digital color, ©2019. All images ©Aislinn Adams