KNOTWEED

Erect knotweed was a staple crop of Native American agriculture. Its seeds were used similar to quinoa. It fell out of favor and the cultivated versions hybridized with wild cousins when new corn varieties that could survive Illinois’ colder temperatures arrived from Mexico.

BROADLEAF PLANTAIN

Arguably one of the first European plants to appear in Illinois, its nickname of “white man’s footprint” alludes to Native Americans using the plant’s arrival on trails as a sign of Europeans moving through an area. Early explorers put the leaves in their boots as a salve.

BITTERSWEET NIGHTSHADE

Illness was not easily treated or well understood by Europeans arriving in Illinois. Many thought ailments were caused by miasmas rising from swamps, rotting trees, or witchcraft, which was treated by consuming bittersweet nightshade berries, causing vomiting.

MULLEIN

Mullein was considered immensely valuable to early settlers. Its leaves were used to treat illness in people and animals. Its flowers were used as a yellow dye. The seeds also contain a mild toxin used to knock out fish in small bodies of water, for a now-illegal form of fishing.

BUCKTHORN

The lack of common resources like lumber or stone on the prairies meant Europeans in Illinois struggled to build fences. Farmers turned to buckthorn and Osage orange as hedges to protect their crops from the cattle and pigs left to roam free eating prairie grass.

MULBERRY

Before there were obvious cash crops in Illinois, farmers experimented with products like silk, which required mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms. One farmer reported that 2,000 trees could be planted in a day, and that based on his own experiments, one could expect to plant 150,000 trees within three years.

TEASEL

Initially introduced to use the bristly seed heads as combs for the wool industry, teasel became widespread across the state with the highway system. Teasel does well in disturbed soils and is now common across the state and easily identifiable from a speeding car.

Illinois is a human-made landscape. Humans domesticated plants in Illinois long before corn, spread the seeds of other cultures as they dug up the prairies, and bounded the last remnants of the prairie state.

The Immigrant Landscape walks help us read the stories of how our unbreakable relationship to the land has changed over 3,000 years. Join us to explore how your community grew from the smallest plants.
How weeds reveal Illinois’ 3,000-year history as a human-made landscape.

FREE NATURE WALKS

June 22, June 30, and July 13
10:00 a.m.
Sand Ridge Nature Center
15891 Paxton Avenue
South Holland, IL 60473

For more information or to RSVP, visit ilhumanities.org/program/immigrant-landscape/