



The Forest Floor

The forest floor is the bottom vertical layer of the forest and is made up of litter, humus and topsoil. The canopy, understorey and ground layer are above the forest's floor. On the forest's floor is litter, which is the loose or lightly packed freshly fallen, leaves, twigs, stems, bark and fruits. Humus is the little bits of decayed leaves and tiny pieces of rotting wood, seeds and decayed plants and animals. Microscopic soil bacteria, fungi and nematodes, along with worms, insects, millipedes and other small creatures break down the litter into humus and mix it with the mineral topsoil. While the activity of these organisms is almost invisible, it is essential for nutrient recycling and continued growth of the forest's plants.

Herbaceous plants, such as forbs (wildflowers), grasses and sedges (grass-like plants), grow on the fertile forest floor. The availability of sunlight at the forest floor, in large part, determines which species of plants that will grow there. Many of these species have adapted a strategy of rapid growth early in the spring sunshine before trees leaf out. Flowering is over by the time the woodland becomes shady. Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), May-apple (*Podophyllum peltatum*), Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica*), Woodland Phlox (*Phlox divaricata*), Jacob's Ladder (*Polemonium reptans*), Jack-in-the-Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*), and Red Trillium (*Trillium recurvatum*) are part of the forest's floor plant community in the Heron Pond Woodland.