Friends of Thacher State Park

Emma T Thacher Nature Center ● 87 Nature Center Way ● Voorheesville, NY 12186
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Thacher Park is so Gnarly!

Gnarly is rooted in the 17th Century and stems from the Middle English noun *knar*, which means a knot in wood or a rock bump. In the 1960s and 1970s surfers adopted the term to describe dangerous waves. By the 1980s *gnarly* came to have opposing meanings – gross, ugly, dangerous, difficult or painful on one hand; cool, impressive or excellent on the other.

The contradictory meanings of *gnarly* in modern lingo certainly apply to Thacher Park since what some view as gross-looking growths on trees, others find attractive. However, gnarls should not be confused with burls, which are different from burr knots, which are different from galls, which are not knots. And then there is chaga, which is none of the above. It can be tricky to distinguish among the various kinds of growths and names given them. But let's try.

A burl (also called a nodule, or a burr in other countries) is a rounded bulbous growth on a tree trunk caused by internal stress, injury, infections, unformed buds, or insects, over which multiple layers of wood have grown. Burls typically are found on hardwood trees and conifers and are always covered by bark. With its swirling grain, burled wood is prized by woodworkers for use in furniture, bowls, knife handles, and other functional or decorative pieces.

A burr knot is a cluster of stubby undeveloped roots that form on the trunk, rootstock, or branches of a tree, most commonly on apple trees. Burr knots are caused by genetics combined with high humidity, warmth, and low light. They are considered undesirable because they can adversely affect the tree.

A gall is a swelling or growth of plant tissue as the result of cell division gone into overdrive. This can be triggered by







continued on the next page ...

Trees with character! Some impressive examples of burls found on our local trees. Left and middle: photos taken at Thacher Park by Jill Harbeck. Right photo was taken locally by Christine Gervasi.

... continued

factors outside the tree, such as bacteria, fungi, or insects and mites. A gall looks like a tumor – lumpy and mishappen and soft, spongy, hollow, or filled with insects or larvae. They may be discolored, unlike burls that are the same color as the bark. Galls are found most commonly on hardwood trees such as oak, maple, hickory, walnut, and mahogany, and on spruce.

A gnarl (*knarl*, archaically) is a descriptive term for trees with twisted, looping branches or heavy joint-like knuckles. This usually happens when old branches have died or the tree has been stressed by old age, harsh weather, or wind, causing the wood to bend or curve. Gnarled trees are often used in scary stories, like the angry apple trees in *The Wizard of Oz* and the Whomping Willow in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

A knot is a hard cross-grained and tight cluster of wood grain where a branch had joined the main tree trunk. The tree grows around the base of the branch leaving a visible knot in the wood.

Lastly, **chaga** is a fungus, black or dark brown on the outside, golden-orange inside. It is found only on birch trees. Reportedly brewing it has health benefits, but this isn't advisable unless you're certain what you're brewing is chaga.

Next time you're in the woods, if the growth is a massive, smooth or bumpy dome on the side of a trunk, it's a burl. If it's a small bumpy cluster on an apple tree limb, it's a burr knot. If it has an irregular shape, it's likely a gall. And if the tree looks old and twisted, it's gnarled.

Late fall and winter, when deciduous trees have shed their leaves, are the best times to go on the hunt for burls, burr knots, galls, and gnarled trees, of which there is no shortage in Thacher Park. Now that's gnarly!

- by Jill Harbeck







A few more of the wonderfully strange shapes from our local woodlands. Photo on the left was taken at Thacher Park by Jill Harbeck. Photos in the middle and right were captured by Christine Gervasi.

Join board meetings virtually!

The Friends Board meets every second Wednesday of every second month. Anybody is welcome at our board meetings and we'd love to have you there! Can't join us in person? Join our Microsoft Teams meetings virtually using this link/QR code! Friends Group Bi-Monthly Board Meeting | Meeting-Join | Microsoft Teams.

The Friends of Thacher Park Meeting Dates for 2026

Wednesday, November 11, at 7:00 pm.

At Thacher Visitor Center. Come join us!

A Most Useful Plant



This time of year marshy areas at Thacher and elsewhere look like a state fair's worth of corn dogs. We call them **cattails.** A more apt name is used in the upper Midwest, "sausagetails" because of their resemblance to a kielbasa. Whatever their name, cattails are fascinating.

What is neat about cattails is that the very features that evolved to optimize growth in the wetland environment are the features which make the plant most useful for human beings.

The wet mucky marsh floor is a very unstable place. To anchor themselves, cattails have horizontal stems called rhizomes. Knitted together, rhizomes support the plants we see. These store starch and are tasty eaten like roasted potatoes.*

The cattail plant, (Typha latifolia), is a grass with parallel veined leaves that can be up to 8 feet long. Collectively the leaves are very strong. The leaves have a waxy coating, which serves to keep water-soluble nutrients inside. Native Americans wove these leaves into mats and built them into wigwams, wherever dry protection was needed.

Archeologists in Germany found a mysterious 35,000 year old tool made of mammoth ivory with spiral grooved holes. To figure out how the tool was used, they created a replica tool. When they fed cattail leaf fibers through the holes, they successfully braided 16 feet of thick strong rope in 10 minutes.

The leaves, growing with their bases in the water, need oxygen to survive. At the base of each leaf is a layer of white air-filled tissue, functioning like a scuba tank. Mats woven with these leaves become a dry, insulated cushion or sleeping mat.

The base of each leaf also has a clear gel which protects the plant from microbes in the water. For people, this gel is soothing, like aloe vera.

Unlike beautiful garden flowers, the cattail flowers are strictly functional. The familiar "sausage" structure is the female, the smaller male sits on top of it, exuding clouds of yellow pollen to the wind. Once pollinated, each of the hundreds of flowers develop seeds connected to fluffy down. To my eye, a cattail marsh in winter looks more like a collection of shedding dogs than like cats. Like dandelion seeds, cattail seeds are carried on the wind to other damp areas where they can take root and form new colonies.

This downy fluff is the basis for the Pottawatomie name for cattails, "We wrap the baby in it". Not only did they use it as bedding for babies but they used it as diapers and to collect menstrual fluids. The down also makes good pillow and mattress stuffing. Archeologists in Poland found 2,000 year old mattresses made with a mixture of wool and cattail fluff.

This only scratches the surface. Kimmerer lists the following ways in which Native Americans used cattails: rope, bedding, insulation, light, food, heat, shelter, raingear, shoes, tools, and medicine (“Braiding Sweetgrass”, p.231).

Cattails are ubiquitous. You can see them most everywhere. But a particularly nice place to get a good look at them up close is along the boardwalk of the Hop Field Trail at Thacher. Come and see for yourselves.

- by Sigrin Newell

*The majority of information about Native American uses of cattails comes from “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Wall Kimmerer.



Photo of intact cattails in fall (top) and in winter after seeds have developed (right) by Christine Gervasi.

Check for updates at www.friendsofthacherpark.org

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As always, call (518) 872-0800 or (518) 872-1237 to verify activity times and dates.

Please feel free to call board members with questions or suggestions.

Many thanks to Jill Harbeck, Sigrin Newell, and Becky Schneider for their contributions to this newsletter.
— Christine Gervasi (Editor)

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87 Nature Center Way
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https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/

Next:

Wednesday, November 11, 2026

Board Meeting

7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center

Friends Membership Form

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State _____ Zip _ _ _ _ _- _ _ _ _

Phone _____ Cell _____

E-Mail _____

I'd like to become a member of the Friends of Thacher/Thompsons Lake State Parks. Enclosed is a check for $_____.

□**Individual**	**$20**	□**Supporter**	**$40**	□**Donation**	
□**Family**	**$25**	□**Corporate**	**$100**	□ **Senior (62) $5**	
□**Student**	**$5**	□**Benefactor**	**$100**		

Please make checks payable to: **Friends of Thacher State Park**
Mail check and form to:
Bonnie Schaller, 6324 Hawes Road, Altamont NY 12009
for more info: bschaller@nycap.rr.com

Looking for a Holiday Gift Idea?



Why not give a Friends of Thacher Park membership? It's a great gift for nature lovers, park enthusiasts, or anyone who enjoys our beautiful park. And your gift helps support the work of the Friends!

Just fill in the name and address of the gift recipient in the form to the left, and mail the form together with your check to Bonnie Schaller.

Thacher Park

Winter Bazaar

December 5 & 6, 2026

Thacher Visitor Center

Unique handcrafted gifts by local artisans, live music, camp fire, and more

As always, you can find a color version of the newsletter at www.friendsofthacherpark.org