

A Trio of Early Woodland Wildflowers

By Edna Greig

As winter's cold gives way to the warmer and longer days of spring, the earliest woodland wildflowers awaken to tap the energy of the sunshine that passes through the leafless tree canopy. These diminutive plants have only a brief time to flower and set seed before the trees leaf out and claim the sun's energy. By mid June, there is little sign of the brief aboveground show of many of these wildflowers, usually only their roots persist until the following spring. This is why they're also called spring ephemerals.

Our area is home to a variety of early spring woodland wildflowers including the following three, which are fairly common in their preferred habitats.

Round-lobed hepatica

Round-lobed hepatica (*Hepatica americana*) is found in upland woods, especially those dominated by sugar maple and mixed hardwoods. It is not a true spring ephemeral because the leaves of the previ-



Round-lobed hepatica

ous year persist, although somewhat tattered and brownish, and protect the emerging flower buds of the next generation. As early as late March, the flowers begin to bloom in a variety of colors, from white to pink to lavender to various shades of blue. Each plant has several to many flowers that are about one inch across and have what appear to be six to eight petals that, to be botanically correct, are actually sepals. The flowers are sometimes fragrant. *Hepatica* comes from the Greek word for liver and relates to the liver-like shape of its three-lobed leaves. Not surprisingly, another common name for the plant is liverwort.

The seeds of hepatica mature by late May. Like many of the other early spring wildflowers, hepatica seeds have a fatty appendage that attracts ants that disperse the seeds. The ants carry the seeds back to their nests, remove the fatty appendage to use as food and discard the seeds unharmed in a waste area of the nest. The ants get the benefit of an important early season food source. The seeds get the benefit of being protected from being eaten by small animals and being deposited underground where they have a better chance of germinating.

Trout lily

Trout lily (*Erythronium americanum*) is found in moist or wet woods, especially along streams. Each plant has a pair of distinctive mottled green and purplish brown leaves that grow directly from the ground. The plants often grow in large colonies, with the most mature plants bearing a solitary one-inch wide, yellow, downward facing flower. The plant's common name may derive from its proximity to trout streams or the fact that its mid-April bloom time coincides with trout fishing season. Another explanation may be that the mottled leaves have a trout-like coloring. Like hepatica, the seeds of trout lily are dispersed by ants.



Trout lily

Dwarf ginseng

Dwarf ginseng (*Panax trifolius*) is a dainty wildflower of rich moist woods that grows about three to four inches tall. It has a whorl of three leaves, each having three to five leaflets, topped by a fluffy white globe shaped flower head in late April. Its small yellow berries mature in late May or early June. Another common name is ground nut, because it has a small round tuberous root. Dwarf ginseng is a relative of the larger wild ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*), also native to the northeast but infrequently found because it has been overcollected for medicinal uses.

These are just three of the early spring wildflowers that grace our woods. Be observant and you may find others.



Dwarf ginseng

Further reading: *Newcomb's Wildflower Guide* by Lawrence Newcomb is an excellent amateur field guide to the wildflowers of the northeast. It has a user-friendly key system that makes wildflower identification a pleasure.

Edna Greig is a frequent contributor to Trail Walker of articles on the natural world.