

Wild and Wonderful Early Bloomers Lisa Johnson **March Program Recap**

On Thursday, March 16th, 2023, Cindy Crosby gave us a glimpse of the coming spring with her program on "Wild and Wonderful Early Bloomers," via Zoom. Cindy's enthusiasm, energy, and love for native plants were felt through the video screen. Cindy earned her master's degree in natural resources/environmental interpretation from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. She is a Master Gardener, a steward for the Schulenberg Prairie at The Morton Arboretum and a dragonfly steward at Nachusa Grasslands. She also writes a blog called "Tuesdays in the Tallgrass"

Cindy's own yard is a mix of about 70% native plants and 30% traditional garden plants. She defines a native plant as one that was here when the Europeans first arrived. They were used by Native Americans and early settlers for food, medicine, and love charms. The plants provided a grocery store and pharmacy for the people who lived here. She added that many of these plants are toxic and one should not try something unless they know how to prepare them correctly.

Cindy pointed out that plants have both common names and scientific names. Scientific names are very specific and pertain to a specific plant, whereas common names can vary from place to place and even through time, so it's always good to know both.

Cindy discussed the historical relevance of several early bloomers and how they were used by the Indigenous people. She explained the science of how the different native plants reproduce and also regaled us of clever ways she has collected seeds as a steward. There were many interesting facts she shared about the following selection of early spring wildflowers.

Violets are often maligned because they are vigorous self-seeders and spread quickly, but they are also iconic local wildflowers. There are over 600 species of violets, including common violet, yellow violets, also called Johnny jump-ups, or violas, (why it's important to use scientific names), prairie violets and bird's foot violets, and fritillary. The violet was voted the Illinois state wildflower by schoolchildren in 1908, but they

did not specify which violet. It was later narrowed down to the common violet, *Viola sororia*. Violets provide early spring green and are also high in vitamin C, leaves and flowers are safe to eat and can be used in salads, or an extract can be prepared.

Native Americans made an infusion that was used for coughs or colds, they also smashed them into a poultice for headaches. Violet seeds are hard to collect, as soon as they are ready, the pods burst open, sending the seeds flying. Cindy said she and a group at Nachusa once tied little bags around the seed pods to catch the seeds when the pods opened, it worked but was very labor intensive. Ants collect the seeds because they are covered with a sweet elaiosome. The ants carry the seed back to their home, eat the elaiosome and leave the seed on the refuse pile, which is full of nutrients for the new plant, this is called myrmecochory. Many plants use this for seed dispersal.

Bloodroot, *Sanguinaria Canadensis*, is one of the earliest bloomers.



Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria Canadensis*)
Photo by Jessie Crow Mermel

The genus name *Sanguinaria*, means to bleed and refers to the reddish sap in the stems and rhizomes. The plant emerges from the ground with the leaf clasping the bud and often grows in colonies. Native Americans used the red juice for dye. The plant is toxic, but the juice possesses anti-bacterial properties which possibly could

be used in mouthwash or toothpaste to fight plaque. The flowers only open on sunny days and usually only bloom for 3 days. On the final day, the stamens bend into the stigma to self-pollinate. The seeds are also dispersed by ants. Folklore says that the sap can be used as a love charm, smear some on one's hands then try to spread it onto the hands of the desired person, and five days later that person will fall in love with you.

Sharp leaved hepatica, *Hepatica nobilis acuta*, blooms in early April, possibly even late March, in shades of pink, white, lavender, and purple. Stems and flowers emerge with furry coats, to protect from the early spring chill. It is pollinated by bees and only has pollen, no nectar. Flowers may also self-pollinate and the seeds are dispersed by ants. The plant may also be called liverleaf, which resembles a human liver due to the shape of the leaves. The Doctrine of Signatures belief said that if something resembled part of the human body by shape or color, it could be used to treat ailments of that part, so it was believed that hepatica could be used to treat liver ailments. Native Americans brewed tea from hepatica.



Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*)
Photo by Jessie Crow Mermel

Virginia bluebells, *Mertensia virginica*, is a member of the borage family. It is pollinated by long-tongued bees and hummingbirds, also robber bees punch holes in the base of the flowers to get to the nectar. It can form large colonies, especially in floodplain areas. This beautiful flower inspired a poem by Anne Bronte "The Bluebell".

White trout lily, *Erythronium albidum*, also called adders tongue and dog-tooth violet, has mottled leaves. It often forms large colonies. Younger plants only produce one leaf. Mature plants have 2 leaves and one flowering stalk. The yellow trout lily, *Erythronium americanum*, is rarely found in our area. It's more common in southern Illinois and further east.

Great white trillium, *Trillium grandiflorum*, blooms in mid to late spring. It is a favorite food for deer and ants spread its seeds.

Prairie trillium, *Trillium recurvatum*, is smaller and shorter than the great white trillium. It also has mottled leaves, like trout lilies. It is sometimes called

bloody noses due to the reddish color of the flowers.

Jack-in-the-pulpit, *Arisaema triphyllum*, is a member of the arum family and is pollinated by flies. The plant has a distinctive and unusual shape. Georgia O'Keefe used it in a series of paintings. The hood is called a spathe and the jack is the spadix. Its seeds were used by Native Americans to tell if someone who was ill or injured would live or die. Drop the seeds in water and stir, if the seed goes around four times the person would live. The plant contains needle-like calcium oxalate crystals, and the berries, foliage, and roots of this plant will cause painful irritation of the mouth and throat if ingested. Native Americans would eat the corms by boiling them several times, changing the water each time, to get rid of the crystals. The corm could then be smashed and dried.

There are several local varieties of anemones, also called windflowers due to the way the flowers nod in the slightest breeze. Wood anemone, *Anemone quinequefolia*, has one flower per plant with a whorl of leaves below. Rue anemone, *Anemonella thalictroides*, and false rue anemone, *Enemion biternatum*, closely resemble each other. Rue anemone flowers have 6 or more petals, (actually sepals) and the plants usually grow individually while false rue flowers have 5 petals and can form dense colonies.

Harbinger of spring, *Erigeron bulbosus*, is a very small plant with tiny white flowers. It is a very early bloomer and the bulbs are edible.

Wild blue phlox, *Phlox divaricata*, blooms around the end of April into early May and has a pleasing scent.

Dutchman's breeches, *Dicentra cucullaria*, this small, delicate plant is another early bloomer. The flowers resemble the breeches worn by Dutch boys, hence the name. The fern-like leaves are as pretty as the flowers. This plant blooms and sets seed quickly, then the whole plant dies back into the ground, disappearing completely until the next spring. It's pollinated by long-tongued bees.



Dutchman's breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*)
Photo by Jessie Crow Mermel

Skunk cabbage, *Symplocarpus foetidus*, looks and smells like rotting meat, hence the name. It is pollinated by beetles and flies which are attracted by the smell. It blooms very early, before most bees emerge. The



Bellwort (*Uvularia grandiflora*)
Photo by Jessie Crow Mermel

roots can survive for 200 years. Native Americans would dry them and grind them into a powder for tattooing.

Bellwort's scientific name, *Uvularia grandiflora*, refers to the way the flowers droop, like the Uvula that hangs in the back of the throat and so it was used to treat throat ailments. Early shoots are said to taste like asparagus. It is pollinated by bees and the seeds are spread by ants.

Marsh marigold, *Caltha palustris*, may also be called cowslip or king's cup. It has bright yellow flowers which closely resemble lesser celandine or figwort, an invasive plant. Lesser celandine has green sepals on the back of the petals, while marsh marigold is yellow, so all yellow-keep fellow, green is mean.

Wild ginger, *Asarum canadense reflexum*, makes a great ground cover. The reddish flowers lie at ground level, under the leaves, and are pollinated by flies and beetles. The leaves are toxic, but the rhizomes have a gingerlike smell and taste and can be used fresh or dried.

Wild geranium, *Geranium maculatum*, is very versatile and can grow in dense shade as well as sunny locations. The roots contain lots of tannins, so it could be used to tan hides.



Wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*)
Photo by Jessie Crow Mermel

May apple, *Podophyllum peltatum*, is in the barberry family. The fruit looks like a gallbladder and the juice resembles bile, so it was used to treat gallbladder ailments. The plant is toxic, but the fruits may be eaten

if prepared correctly. Scientists are studying its use to treat various cancers. The fruits are often eaten by turtles, who then spread the seeds.

Cutleaf toothwort, *Dentaria laciniata*, has white, tubular flowers above 3 deeply toothed leaves.

Spring beauty, *Claytonia virginica*, another very early bloomer, is a favorite of many. Euell Gibbons was known to say that the cooked corms were delicious.



Great white trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*)
Photo by Jessie Crow Mermel

These spring wildflowers provide food for our souls after the long winter. Cindy wrapped up by saying that she hopes her program excites us to get out and enjoy these spring bloomers. She also provided a list of favorite websites and books, including illinoiswildflowers.info, wildflower.org, prairiemoon.com, and plants.usda.gov. Books included *Secrets of Wildflowers* by Jack Sanders, *Wildflowers of Illinois* by Sylvan Runkel, *Native American Ethnobotany* by Daniel Moeman, and *Floriography* by Jessica Roux.