

Spanning the Gap

More Than Just a Pretty Face



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Spanning the Gap
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What kind of wildflower would you scatter on the floor to get rid of snakes and spiders? Which would cause a rainy day if you picked it?

To many of us, spring means the return of wildflowers to field and woodland, where we enjoy them simply for their beauty. For many centuries however, wildflowers were sought for their wealth of uses, ranging from food, medicine and dyes to magical charms and potions. Over time, the powers of certain plants to cure sickness or dispel evil spirits gave them a spiritual characteristic. Legends and superstitions were created to explain their magical nature. Many of the practical uses of wildflowers are no longer familiar to us, but perhaps some traces of the magic and superstitions still remain.



Downy yellow violet (*viola pubescens*). (NPS photo)

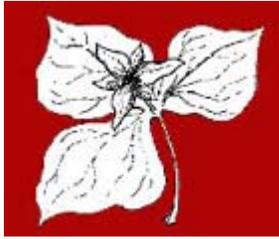
One of the first spring flowers to catch our eye is usually not recognized as a flower at all, because its blossoms are not easily noticeable. The purple, green, and brown mottled leaf tips of **skunk cabbage** (*symplocarpus foetidus*) are poking through the soil in wet woodland areas as early as February, even when snow still covers the ground. When the temperature climbs above freezing, the flower buds of the skunk cabbage begin to enlarge, and the plant produces heat. With the help of its spongy leaves, the skunk cabbage can maintain a temperature of about 70 degrees. This may help release the plant's skunk-like odor. The bad smell makes most people turn away from the plant, but the American Indians found that breathing in the strong fumes from the crushed leaves could help cure a headache.



Skunk cabbage *spathe* encircles a *spadix* of small flowers (*lower right*.)

Other early season flowers also give off a bad odor. Since some of the first spring insects feed on dead animals, the foul smell of these flowers may help attract the insects to pollinate the plant.

Some of these wildflowers have an added attraction (for carrion flies, anyway) -- they are colored like decaying meat.



An example of this coloration is the **purple trillium (*trillium erectum*)**, also known as **stinking Benjamin** or **wet dog trillium**. A more complimentary common name for purple and red trillium is **wake robin**,

because some people thought the trillium heralded the robin's yearly return. Women thought well of this flower at one time, for they would commonly use it to make a love potion. Be warned, however -- an old mountain superstition says that if you pick trillium, it will rain. Of course, this isn't the only reason not to pick trillium! Even under good growing conditions in the rich woodlands it prefers, it takes six years for a trillium seed to develop into a flowering plant.



If you're walking the woodlands in March, April or May, you may spot a small simple flower with blue, pink or white blossoms. The leaves of this plant have three rounded

lobes, resembling the lobes of the human liver. Thus it was given the name **hepatica**, from the Greek word "hepar," meaning liver (as in *hepatitis*.)

Sometimes the shape of a plant was believed to be a clue from the supernatural powers about how the plant should be used. For this reason, the hepatica was made into a remedy for liver ailments.

(Left, top) Purple trillium.
(Bottom) Hepatica. (NPS sketches by P.K.)



Purple trillium in Dingmans Ravine. The flowers are usually brownish-red or "liver"-red, but may also be pink, salmon, greenish, or white.



Sharp-lobed hepatica. (*hepatica acutiloba*) The leaf is directly below the flower, with one lobe pointing left and one pointing to the bottom.



Hepatica flowers may be white, lavender, pink, or blue.

Wildflowers were sometimes believed to cause illness rather than cure it. In windy March a small white or pinkish flower appears in the moist areas of the woods. Pliny the Elder, an ancient Roman scholar, said this flower would only open at the wind's bidding. Its name, **anemone** (*anemone quiquefolia*), comes from the Greek word for wind, "anemos" (as in *animated*.) One ancient Greek myth tells how a nymph named Anemone was changed into a fragile spring flower by the goddess Flora, who was jealous because Anemone was loved by the west wind, Zephyr.

Another Greek tale describes how anemones grew from the ground where Venus wept over the body of slain Adonis. Because of these stories, people associated sorrow and pain with anemones. The Romans would say prayers as they picked the first anemones of spring, to protect themselves from disease in the coming year. In China it is called the death flower, and is planted on graves. The early Europeans believed so strongly that these flowers brought on illness, that they held their breath when passing anemones.

The origin of a wildflower's name often has several explanations. **Solomon's seal** (*polygonatum biflorum*) with its row of small greenish flowers hanging from an arching stem, is a familiar woodland sight in late spring and early summer. The root of this plant has a circular scar for each year of the plant's growth. Some believe the scars resemble the royal seal of King Solomon, the tenth century B.C. king of Israel who was famed for his wisdom, and was knowledgeable about medical herbs. Others hold that the name comes from the use of the herb as a balm to seal or close up wounds. Yet another theory describes how the six-petal flower resembles the Star of David, which in early days was known as Solomon's Seal.

There are as many uses for this wildflower as there are stories about its name. American Indians ground the root to make flour, or sometimes would eat the root pickled. If the root is crushed and applied to a



Thimbleweed (*anemone virginiana*).



Wood anemone (*anemone quinquefolia*). (NPS photo by Warren Bielenberg)



Solomon's seal before the flowers turn yellow.



bruise, it is thought to take the black and blue out of the skin. In the 16th century, this flower was called the seal of the Blessed Virgin (Mary, mother of Christ). It was believed you could spread the plants on the floor of a house to get rid of snakes and spiders.

Note: There is a white flower known as **false** Solomon's seal (*smilacina racemosa*). Like true Solomon's seal, it is in the lily family, but note, in the photo to the right, the flowers at the end of the stem, instead of all along the stem.

Solomon's seal, Mt. Minsi PA.



False Solomon's seal.

The common **blue violet** (*viola cucullata*) has a surprising variety of uses. Even before the days of the Roman Empire, women picked these flowers to mix with goat's milk for a facial tonic. The leaves and flowers of the violet are edible, and contain high quantities of vitamins C and A. In fact, pound for pound, violets contain three times as much vitamin C as oranges. The flowers have been made into candy, jam, syrup, wine, and a tea for curing headaches. Scientists have even used the blossoms to determine the acidity or alkalinity of a substance before modern testing methods were invented. The juice from crushed violet blossoms turns red if it is touched by an acid, and green if touched by a base. A less scientific use of the plant was to wear a garland of violets around your neck to dispel the odors of wines and spirits, thus preventing drunkenness.



Common blue violet. (NPS photo by Warren Bielenberg)

Although many uses of wildflowers have a scientific basis, others are clearly the product of superstition. Extreme caution should be taken when using any wild plant internally or externally, for many plants can be poisonous, or deadly. Use only the advice of plant experts when selecting wildflowers for your use, and always use a reputable field guide to be absolutely correct in your plant identification.

It is possible, however, to grow many varieties of wildflowers in your own garden. You can purchase seeds and plants from many seed companies and garden centers. Always try to purchase plants from greenhouses that propagate their own

Please remember that all wildflowers within Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area are protected by federal law and may not be picked or dug up for transplanting.

One place near the recreation area to view, learn about, and purchase wildflower seeds is **Bowman's Hill Wildflower**

wildflowers, since some growers unlawfully take flowers from wild areas. Check with your local agricultural extension agent about where you can purchase wildflower seeds and plants. By planting wildflowers around your yard, you'll encourage the survival of a variety of plant species, and have the added pleasure of watching these flowers blossom right outside your door.

Preserve in New Hope PA.
(www.bhwp.org)