

The Spring Purples! by Joy Howell

I naturally enjoy the quiet and subtle changes as the forest lights up with new spring ephemerals. During the 2020 spring, the simplest things have become the most valuable for most of us. These weeks at home made me get out and view each and every new blossom! When I say get out, I'm referring to the wild forest and fields. You know the "back forty". This is where our great grandparents may have gone on an early spring stroll on a Sunday afternoon. Nature never let them down as the earliest blooming plants are in March.

These early forest flowers transform, gain and store all the energy they need in just a matter of 6-8 weeks before the tree canopy emerges. All that valuable energy is stored in bulbs, corms, rhizomes or tubers. These must be the "Energizer bunny" of the flowers!

These blue to violet spring gems were selected with the following considerations:

- ✓ Native species to the Mid-Atlantic region
- ✓ April and May bloom period
- ✓ Environmental niche
- ✓ Nursery availability
- ✓ Often found in natural settings unlike a formal, planned and maintained garden.
- ✓ of course, those that are my favorites 👍

Cut Leaf Toothwort, *Dentaria laciniata*, recently renamed *Cardamine laciniata* is in the Mustard Family. This spring plant has been known over the centuries as Pepperroot, Ladies Smock or Crinkleroot. Reaching a height of ten to fourteen inches, it appears to "dance" gently in the forest adding an array of mostly white, but sometimes pale pink or lavender to a habitat that is still drab from winter. The four petals to each blossom reflect ultraviolet light that is quite visible to bees when the pickings are slim early in the season. Honeybees and bee-like flies are the common pollinators.

Some believed if it resembled "teeth" maybe it would cure tooth aches. This was solely based on the sharply toothed leaves and the tooth-like projections found on the rhizomes.

Wild Blue Phlox, *Phlox divaricata*, is found in a forest or stream edge with moist soil and shade. The Greek word, Phlox, means "flame". The five petals of this spring gem provide a month-long flame of blue/violet. Add the blooming white dogwood and you will "Wow" at the show! Just in case the color does not attract the pollinators of bees and butterflies, there is a gentle fragrance to get the insect antennae moving in the right direction. It selects its own pollinator by having down and a sticky substance on the stem that deters the

crawling pollinators. This plant will reach an average height of eighteen inches and contains unstalked lance shaped leaves appearing opposite on the stem. The cycle is complete when the rootstock forms horizontal runners over the ground. New phlox stems will sprout from the tips next spring.

Just a little trivia: Linnaeus associated the name phlox based on the shape of the torch-like shape of the bud. Additionally, the nickname of Sweet William is a misnomer. Sweet William is a garden annual.

Blue Flag Iris, *Iris versicolor* is a wetland beauty in the month of May. Reaching a maximum height of three feet, the lance shaped leaves have contributed to this plant being a symbol of chivalry.

The showy, purple-veined blue flower with yellow blotches will catch your eye and the attention of its pollinators. Insects attracted to the sepals must crawl under the tip of the style and brush past the stigma and stamen to facilitate pollination!

If given the opportunity to clump, it could serve to prevent soil erosion. It also might be a companion plant for Golden ragwort and some wetland ferns.

Any ingestion of any parts of this iris may produce violent effects. Some have reported a very allergic reaction by handling the leaves and rhizomes. Therefore, the nickname Poison Flag!

Virginia Waterleaf, *Hydrophyllum virginianum*, is a much larger plant growing three feet tall and as wide. It may dominate the forest floor but that's ok because the radiating clusters of the five-petal flower is quite attractive. The color is the same violet hue as the Blue Phlox. I had difficulty remembering the name of this gem until Mr. Carl who was older and wiser pointed out the water marks on the large toothed leaves! Now I am the wiser! Thanks Mr. Carl!

Virginia Bluebells, *Mertensia virginica*, Other Field Names include Cowslip, Bunch Flower or Oysterleaf.

Don't forget Virginia Bluebells! They are a special highlight in the spring, readily available and easy to grow. At the sight of the pink and purplish Virginia Bluebells emerging in April I have been known to announce that they are in bloom and spring has sprung! Actually, the buds are just peeking from the wetland forest floor. Some eight to ten days later, once their stalk has reached at least 18", the mature blossoms created light blue trumpet-like flower.

The oval, smooth edged leaves are succulent and quite attractive too. Basal leaves are notably longer than the stemmed leaves. Its main wildlife value is its supply of pollen for moths, butterflies and hummingbirds. I have also witnessed many bees trying to manage the funnel shaped flower.

Wild Geranium, *Geranium maculatum*, or Cranesbill and Shameface is one of my favorites! I would like to prepare you by saying it is not at all like the garden center variety! The flower emerges more like a violet color and later as it fades it is more pink. The flower has five petals and is very showy but not the "pop" of the annuals. The leaves are hairy with teeth and lobes. It also requires part to all shade. Trust me I've tried sun

and they are not happy! I have enjoyed this in my garden for years because it grows as an organized mound. A “haircut” later in the season may extend the blooming season. It also has a way to select its pollinators. The male blossom fades before the female parts are ready so the honeybees, mining bees and flower flies work a little harder but it is best for the whole. When the seed pod matures it enlarges and bursts throwing the seeds up to 30 feet from the parent plant.

Many lores have followed this plant. Some are based on plant characteristics and its Greek meaning of “crane” while others are totally a tale! So, send the Wild Geranium to the person you desire and you will please them! Unless of course they expect the showy, colorful garden variety!

The Violets You thought “The Purples” would lead you to the Violets! I won’t even go there! Seventy some different species, where could I begin? Some are stemmed and some are unstemmed. Botanist terminology! I laugh at my approach to violets. In John Eastman’s guide, *The Book of Forest and Thicket*, he clearly states, “Trying to identify a violet by the book often becomes an exercise in frustration.” So, here is my quote, “Just enjoy their gift to the forest!”

Directives for staying at home are changing daily, but when it becomes possible, I invite you take a slow drive along a back road or ask your neighbor if you can follow along the creek or farm path. You might discover many of these spring gems. Some may be found in our York County Parks, other local park areas along the Susquehanna River and at Shenk’s Ferry Wildflower Preserve off of River Road in Lancaster County. It is a premier wildflower site on the East Coast. Check each site’s website for possible closures before going. Stay well and happy exploring!

Joy Howell is a Master Gardener in York County. Penn State Master Gardeners are volunteers for Penn State Cooperative Extension. For more information, contact the Master Gardener office at 717-840-7408 or yorkmq@psu.edu.