

HOME-GARDEN

Stand-out spring ephemerals are a great way to celebrate Native Plant Month

Mark Richardson Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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April is a great month to celebrate native plants. Recently, Massachusetts joined the growing number of states across the country to declare the first full month of spring “Native Plant Month.” For me, nothing marks the start of spring like the fleeting blossoms of native spring ephemerals — those crafty little plants that wake up early, flower quickly, and go dormant before summer temperatures get too hot.

“Ephemeral” means fleeting, or short-lived. While the term aptly describes the way these plants “disappear” after flowering, it doesn’t capture the long-lived nature of many of these perennials. They return year after year but spend most of their time as an underground stem, or rhizome, waiting patiently for the soil to warm. Ephemerals get started early to absorb all the sunlight they can before trees fully leaf out and make the forest floor too dark for photosynthesis.

Native spring ephemerals are great garden additions if you want something that will spread. Ephemerals spread vegetatively through the expansion of their rhizomes, which grow little by little each year. Many ephemerals also have unique, symbiotic relationships with ants that aid in seed dispersal. After flowering, many spring ephemerals produce seeds with a small protein-rich appendage called elaiosome attached. The elaiosome attracts ants who then carry the seed back to their colony where the elaiosome is eaten and the seed is left behind to germinate in its new location. Some of my favorite ephemerals for New England gardens rely on ants to spread their seeds around.

Virginia Bluebells

Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) are native throughout the eastern United States and Canada, where they grow in the understory of deciduous forests with moist soils. They are one of the earliest ephemerals to emerge in spring, with bright-green leaves that resemble

lettuce starts when they first emerge. Tight clusters of pink-purple flower buds emerge soon after the leaves. Their flower stalks eventually reach 12-18” in height with bell-shaped clusters of light blue flowers. Flowers often fade to pink after they’re pollinated.

Trillium

There are four different species of trillium that naturally occur in New England: white wakerobin (*Trillium grandiflorum*), nodding wakerobin (*T. cernuum*), red trillium (*T. erectum*), and painted trillium (*T. undulatum*). One of the showiest trillium, however, is not historically from New England, but from central and southern Appalachia. Like all trillium, yellow wakerobin (*Trillium luteum*) has a distinct growth pattern organized around the number three—three leaflets on each stem, three flower petals, and three sepals. Yellow wakerobin is a sessile trillium, whose flower appears to sit directly on top of the leaflets, without a peduncle, or flower stem. Its leaves are mottled, with light and dark patches. Its best feature is its beautiful pale-yellow flower that smells of lemon chiffon. Yellow wakerobin typically blooms around Mother’s Day in our area. It pairs well with Virginia bluebells for an early spring show of blue and yellow.

Wood Poppy

Wood poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*) naturally occurs in the western Appalachians, north to Michigan and parts of central Canada. Its bright yellow flowers typically open when the last of the daffodils in our area peter out. Like Virginia bluebells and yellow wakerobin, wood poppy prefers the shade garden, and will thrive in average to moist garden soils. In my garden, I frequently find new wood poppy plants in random places where they were clearly carried by an ant, including growing out of the bottom of my compost bin.

Dutchman’s Breeches

Dutchman’s breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*) is a cousin of the Asian bleeding heart (*Lamprocapnos spectabilis*) most gardeners might be familiar with as a perennial garden staple. These adorable little spring ephemerals feature finely cut leaves that emerge in early spring, followed by small sprays of flowers that resemble baggy “pantaloons” hanging from a clothesline. Dutchman’s breeches are important forage for early emerging bumblebees.

Spring ephemerals are true harbingers of spring putting on fabulous, if short-lived, displays. With a little patience, many of them can spread throughout your garden giving you

something new to look forward to year after year. To learn more about spring ephemerals and see their colorful floral displays, visit a botanic garden or garden center this Native Plant Month and ask where to find them!

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Mark Richardson. Located on 171 acres in Boylston. New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.