

VIRGINIA BLUEBELLS, VIRGINIA COWSLIP, ROANOKE-BELLS

Mertensia virginica

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This beautiful spring wildflower produces funnel-form pendant flowers that begin as pink but turn blue as the flowers open. The genus is named in honor of F.K. Mertens, a professor of botany at Bremen, and the species honors Virginia.

Early on this lovely flower made the trip to Europe, where it quickly became a regular in English gardens. William Robinson, writing in "The English Flower": "...handsomest of all is the Virginia cowslip. It is a charming old garden plant, and one which unfortunately has never become common."



These plants are spring ephemerals, dying back by the end of June. Plant something like turtleheads (*Chelone glabra*) or native ferns to take over after the bluebells fade. The leaves are large, entire, and alternate which disappear in fall and winter. Propagation is by seed or division after the flowers fade, but do so before the leaves disappear entirely, or you won't find the roots.

Natural range is New York to Michigan, and south to Alabama and Missouri. It is a plant of Virginia's mountain and piedmont areas, rather than coastal regions, so it must be given a moist, shady environment. ❖



Wildflower Spot – April 2008
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

ROUND-LOBED HEPATICA

Hepatica americana

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This small native plant is one of the earliest spring wildflowers, blooming March through April. With no stems the plant has large basal leaves with 3 rounded lobes. Hairy flower stalks emerge from a tattered clump of leathery, burgundy-brown tinted leaves from the previous year. New leaves appear only after the flowers bloom. Light blue to lavender or white flowers are easy to find in the forest litter, 1 inch across, on 8-inch tall stalks. The flowers have numerous stamens, are without true petals, the petal-like 5-9 sepals surrounded by 3 bracts.

Round-lobed Hepatica grows in dry or moist upland woods over most of Virginia. The range is from Quebec to Minnesota and Manitoba and south to Georgia, Tennessee and Missouri.

Widely used by Native Americans and colonists to treat many ailments, the plant served most commonly as a leaf tea for liver disorders. The common names, Hepatica and Liverleaf refer to the leaves being 3-lobed (as is the liver) and



becoming dark in color, with age. Treating organ problems with the plants that most suggest them is known as the “doctrine of signatures,” a former practice that originated in China. “Liverleaf” could also refer to the brownish color of the overwintering leaves. ❖

Photo: *Hepatica (Hepatica americana)* taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – April 2009
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

FIELD PANSY

Viola bicolor

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Blooming all over fields, meadows, roadsides and disturbed land, field pansy is a familiar, welcome sign of spring. *Viola bicolor* (flowers white to medium blue with yellow marking) is related to the European pansy, *Viola tricolor* (flowers purple-blue, yellow and white). Field pansy was once thought to be an American variety of the Eurasian *Viola kitaibeliana*, but has more recently been recognized as the only native American pansy.

These plants are most commonly known as Johnny-jump-ups, so named for the plant's quick growth in the spring. Field pansy has also been called the "Confederate violet", the small flowers are thought to be the tears of Confederate soldiers as they left the battlefield. The blue-veined grayish-white morph of the common violet, *V. sororia*, is also commonly known as "Confederate Violet."

Field pansy is an annual, spreading by seed,



and appearing in patches or colonies. The alternate leaves are spoon-shaped; paired stipules grow alongside the leaf and are deeply toothed. The flower has five petals, the lowest heavily veined, and extending back into a spur; the side petals are usually bearded.

This plant tolerates soils ranging from sandy to clay to limestone, and is found in most of eastern U.S. except the extreme north. This species has been used to create some of the pansy cultivars sold in nurseries as annual garden plants. ❖

Photo: Field Pansy (*Viola bicolor*) VNPS

For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot - April 2010
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT

Arisaema triphyllum

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This easy to grow native wildflower has unusual foliage and flower. The striped green and purple canopy (spathe) curves gracefully over a club-shaped spadix (the “Jack” or preacher in his canopied pulpit). The spathe is sometimes all green. The lower portion of the spadix carries tiny flowers of one or both sexes, where heat and odor are produced, attracting pollinating flies. A single 3-parted leaf on a long stalk then expands and overtops the spathe.

Fruits are smooth, shiny green berries clustered at the base of the thickened spadix; they ripen in late summer when the spathe and leaf wither, revealing the cluster of bright red berries borne on a stalk 1-2 feet high, replacing the leaf and flower.

Jack-in-the-Pulpit is an excellent choice for a shade or woodland wildflower garden where it will thrive in rich soil and partial to full shade. It is very easy to cultivate and requires little care, and grows under a variety of conditions. It partners well with columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) and foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*).

Native in all counties of Virginia, this woodland plant is found in every state east of the Mississippi, and extends through central U.S.



to the borders of Colorado and Utah and into Canada.

While birds and mammals eat the berries of this plant, all parts produce intensely irritating calcium oxalate crystals. American Indians knew that cooking and drying eliminated the bitter taste; roots were used as a vegetable, ground for bread doughs, and used for a variety of medicinal purposes.

Arisaema refers to the plant's resemblance to other members of the Arum family; haima (blood) refers to some species bearing red blotches. The plant's 3 leaflets are reflected by the species name *triphyllum*. ❖

Photo: Jack-in-the-Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*) taken by Phillip Merritt
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot - April 2011
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

CUTLEAF TOOTHWORT

Cardamine concatenata
(=*Dentaria laciniata*)

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter,*

The preferred habitat of Cutleaf Toothwort is moist, rich woods, wooded bottomlands, rocky banks and bluffs and limestone outcrops. Found in nearly every county in Virginia, and half the counties of the Coastal Plain, this plant is native from Maine and southern Quebec to Minnesota, and south to Florida, Louisiana and Oklahoma.

The rootstocks are peppery- pungent, and can be used as a horseradishlike condiment, mixed with vinegar and a pinch of salt. The root has been used as a folk remedy for toothaches. American Indians chewed root for colds and gargled with root tea for sore throats.

The common name refers to the tooth-like projections on the underground stems. ❖



A member of the Mustard Family, this small plant is easily recognized by the whorl of 3 leaves, each divided into 3 long, narrow, jagged-lobed segments. The 6-12 inch stem is downy and topped with a cluster of small, four-petaled pink or white flowers. Toothworts bloom in the spring, before the leaves of deciduous trees appear.

Photo: Cutleaf Toothwort (*Cardamine concatenata*) taken by Jan Newton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – April 2012
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

LYRE-LEAVED SAGE

Salvia lyrata

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Very commonly seen on woodland walks in early spring, this perennial has lipped lavender-blue flowers, about an inch long, in whorls around a square stem. Lyre-leaved Sage is a fibrous-rooted perennial with a hairy stem, growing 1-2 feet tall. The leaves are mostly at the base, usually deeply lobed (“lyre-shaped”) and long-stalked, forming a rosette. Stem leaves are few or more, entire, and wavy-toothed or lobed.

Blooming April through June, the trumpet-shaped flowers are attractive to bees and butterflies. When a bee lands on the exposed lower lip, the stamens are tipped, dusting the insect with pollen.

Lyre-leaved Sage is easy to grow in average soil in full sun or part shade. The plant will tolerate clay, rocky or wet soil, heat and humidity. Self-seeding, it will naturalize in good growing conditions. Plantings work well in cottage gardens, borders, naturalized areas, moist spots, or along streams or ponds. It is native to every county in Virginia, and ranges from Connecticut



to southern Ohio and Missouri, and south to Florida and Texas.

The plant is also known as “Cancerweed,” since the leaves were once thought to be an external cure for cancer. The genus name comes from the Latin *salvare*, meaning “to save or heal.” Native Americans used the root in ointments for sores and whole-plant tea medicinally. ❖

Photo: Lyre-leaved Sage (*Salvia lyrata*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – April 2013
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

FALSE GARLIC

Nothoscordum bivalve

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This slender bulbous perennial has ½-inch white flowers clustered at the top of leafless stems up to 13 inches in height. Each flowering stem is tipped with a pair of membranous bracts from which arises the “umbel” of 5-12 long-stalked flowers. The 6 white tepals are often green or purplish along the midrib on the lower side. False Garlic has grass-like basal leaves only, slender and smooth on the margins.

False Garlic occurs in open woodlands, fields, along roadsides, only in the southern coastal counties of Virginia. The range is from south-east Virginia to Florida, and west to Nebraska and Texas. The plant blooms in early spring (March-May) and again in the fall (September-October).

The scientific name of the plant is derived from the Greek *nothos*, meaning “false,” and *scordon*, for “garlic.” *Bivalve* may refer to the pair of bracts below the flowers. Also known as Crow Poison, the plant is mildly toxic. It resembles Wild Onion (*Allium canadense*) but lacks the smell of onion or garlic when crushed. ❖



Photo: False Garlic (*Nothoscordum bivalve*) photographed by Helen Hamilton at Black Point on Jamestown Island, Williamsburg.
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – April 2014
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

POSSUMHAW VIBURNUM

Viburnum nudum

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Possumhaw Viburnum is an underutilized shrub, with attractive leaves and multi-colored fruits. The opposite leaves are dark green and glossy, somewhat leathery with wavy edges, turning red to purplish in the fall. In April, creamy-white flowers with a musky odor appear in 3 to 5 inch flat-topped clusters (cymes). They are followed in August through October by green pea-sized berries (drupes)

in hanging clusters which change to shades of bright pink, rose, bluish, then purplish black. The color transformation is unsynchronized, resulting in clusters of many-colored fruits.

This ornamental shrub is medium-sized to 12 feet, with glossy twigs and brown-red buds. It is easily grown in average, medium to wet, well-drained soil in full sun to part shade. The plant is adaptable, but prefers wet, mucky, acid soils. It transplants well and is tolerant of cold and drought. As needed, pruning can be done in late fall or early spring. Possumhaw viburnum occurs in eastern and central Virginia, and ranges from Newfoundland to Manitoba, south to Florida and Texas.



The straight species will usually produce copious fruits when planted in groups rather than as single specimens. The plant will not self-fertilize, requiring the services of insects to carry pollen to the flowers of another plant. Nursery cultivars are usually clones of a single plant, developed from cuttings, and often do not produce good fruit set.

The fruit is eaten by many songbirds, water birds, shorebirds, and small mammals. ❖

Photo: Possumhaw Viburnum (*Viburnum nudum*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – April 2015
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

GOLDEN RAGWORT

Packera aurea

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Golden Ragwort is a welcome sign of spring, covering swampy areas with bright yellow, from mid-March through early summer. The buds are purple, and open to display yellow disc and ray flowers, unusual for a member of the Aster Family -- the rays are often white. This native perennial grows 1-3 feet tall, with only a few deeply-cut leaves on the stems. The leaves at the base of the plant are heart-shaped, in a large rosette. After the flowers fade, these leaves spread to form a nice groundcover which will persist over most of the winter.

Growing naturally in bogs, wet woods, flood-plains and meadows in eastern North America, Golden Ragwort thrives in acid, rich soil, zones 3 to 9. The plant can be aggressive, and will grow under trees where nothing else thrives. Propagation is by seed and division.

Golden Ragwort is one of the herbs (ground and dissolved in alcohol) that are sold as Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, widely marketed as a cure for any "female complaint." A tea made from the root and leaves was used by American Indians, settlers and herbalists to treat delayed and irregular menses, leucorrhea and childbirth complications, leading to its alternate common name "squaw-weed."



"Ragwort" means a plant with ragged leaves, and "wort" is an Old English word for "plant".

Blooming in the spring, the flowers are an important source of nectar for early insects and butterflies. ❖

Photo: Golden Ragwort (*Packera aurea*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

COMMON BLUE VIOLET

Viola sororia

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Found in most of the counties in Virginia, and widely distributed across eastern and central U.S., this bright little plant often grows in lawns that are not mowed too high. While Virginia Tech lists this violet as “primarily a weed of turfgrass and landscapes”, their deep purple-blue color is a welcome sign of spring.

The flowers and leaves are on separate stems, all growing no more than 8 inches tall. Blooming early, from March through June, the flowers furnish nectar to the tiny insects that emerge from overwintering in early spring. This is a host plant for fritillary butterflies that lay their eggs on the leaves, which are food for their caterpillars.

Spreading easily by runners and seeds, many gardeners use this common blue violet as groundcover. The plant distributes seeds by mechanical ejection from the three-parted seed capsules, immediately after flowering. Seeds that were ejected in the previous year appear as tiny plants under the clumps that are older.

Common Blue Violet prefers partial sun or light shade and moist to average conditions. The soil should be a rich silty loam or clay loam with above average amounts of organic matter. The flowers and young leaves of violets are edible, and can be added to salads in small amounts. The taste is bland.



Confederate Violet



Common Blue Violet

There are several forms of *Viola sororia* with differently colored flowers; these often grow in close proximity to each other in a given area. A variety with whitish petals and violet markings is known as Confederate Violet. Common Blue Violet is the state flower of New Jersey, Illinois, Rhode Island & Wisconsin. ❖

Wildflower Spot – April 2017
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SWEETGUM

Liquidambar styraciflua

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton*

This tree is easily recognized in winter condition with the corky twigs and drooping, spiny fruit balls. Sweetgum is a large tree with a straight trunk, rounded crown, and deeply ridged gray bark. In early spring inconspicuous greenish flowers are in ball-like clusters along with shiny green leaves arranged alternately on the branch, with distinctive 5-7 starlike lobes. They are aromatic when crushed, and turn reddish in autumn. The leaves of Sweetgum are sometimes confused with those of maples which also show palmate lobes, but the leaves of maples are arranged opposite each other on the twig.

Sweetgum grows in moist or wet woodlands and is widely distributed, ranging from the Connecticut coast to the highlands of Guatemala, mostly in the coastal zone. In Virginia, Sweetgum is found in the eastern and central counties. Flowers appear in April-May; fruits in September-November.

The common name is derived from *liquidus*, “fluid”, and the Arabic *ambar*, alluding to the fragrant gum which exudes from the tree. An important timber tree, Sweetgum is a leading furniture wood, used for cabinetwork, veneer



and boxes. It takes stains readily and is often finished to resemble expensive woods.

While much used as a fast-growing ornamental tree, the fallen seedheads are a nuisance on lawns. But the fruit-balls, sometimes spray-painted, are popular in dried floral arrangements.

Several species of songbirds and squirrels eat the seeds; beaver often use this species when available. Sweetgum was first reported by the Spanish naturalist, Hernandez, in Mexico City in 1615, and introduced to England in 1688. ❖

Photo: Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – April 2018

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SPRING BEAUTY

Claytonia virginica

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*



Spring Beauty, well named, is a delicate spring ephemeral with loose clusters of star-like white to light pink flowers; the petals are striped with pink veins and the anthers are also pink. This small plant is spectacular in large patches. Flowers bloom in April on top of thin stems 4-6 inches tall; dark green grass-like leaves continue to grow after bloom and may eventually reach 9-12 inches tall before the leaves disappear in late spring as the plants go into dormancy.

Spring Beauty grows from an underground corm, similar to a small potato, which has a sweet, chestnut-like flavor. Native Americans and colonists used them for food and they are still enjoyed by those interested in edible wild plants but are time-consuming to collect in quantity sufficient for a meal. Spring Beauty appears in The Song of Hiawatha as “Miskodeed,” according to author Timothy Coffey.

Growing naturally in all Virginia counties except those in the extreme southwest, Spring Beauty prefers organically rich, moist, well-drained soils, in full sun to part shade. The plant naturalizes easily by corm-offsets and self-seeding.

The genus name honors John Clayton (1686-1773), Clerk to the County Court of Gloucester County, Virginia, from 1720 until his death, and regarded as the greatest American botanists of his day. He was one of the earliest collectors of plant specimens in Virginia. The local chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society is named “the John Clayton Chapter” in his honor. ❖

Photo: Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

VIRGINIA BLUEBELL, VIRGINIA COWSLIP

Mertensia virginica

By Helen Hamilton, *John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Virginia Bluebell is a beautiful spring wildflower that produces funnel-form pendant flowers beginning as pink but then turn blue as the flowers open. They are pollinated by bees that are large enough to push their way up the tube, and more commonly by butterflies and moths.

This native perennial is a spring ephemeral – the leaves first appear in March as deep purple, quickly turning green. They are large, 2-8 inches long and somewhat fragile as the stems are nearly hollow. Clumps grow up to 2 feet tall and go dormant by early summer after the flowers fade and seeds are formed. With no remnants of the plant remaining, it's easy to assume it is gone, making the mistake of digging and planting in the same location. Installation of other shade-loving perennials should be done while the plant is still visible. A stunning combination for the spring is with yellow daffodils and pink tulips. Native ferns, Solomon's Seal, trillium, and Foam Flower would work well also.

It's difficult to move these beautiful plants. Small seedlings can be transplanted, but they will take several years to bloom. Mature plants have a long taproot and once established, they don't like to be moved. If necessary larger plants can be moved when dormant, into areas with abundant moisture. Bluebells have few pests and deer don't bother them.

The natural range of Virginia Bluebell is New York to Michigan, and south to Alabama and Missouri. It is a plant of Virginia's mountain and piedmont areas, rather than coastal regions, so it must be given a moist, shady environment.

Early on this lovely flower made the trip to Europe, where it quickly became a regular in English gardens. William Robinson, writing in "The English Flower": "...handsomest of all is the Virginia cowslip. It is a charming old garden plant, and one which unfortunately has never become common."

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Wildflower Spot –April 2020

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

GOLDEN RAGWORT

Packera aurea

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Golden Ragwort is a welcome sign of spring, covering swampy areas with bright yellow, from mid-March through early summer. The buds are purple, and open to display yellow disc and ray flowers, unusual for a member of the Aster Family -- the rays are often white. This native perennial grows 1-3 feet tall, with only a few deeply cut leaves on the stems. The leaves at the base of the plant are heart-shaped, in a large rosette. After the flowers fade, these leaves spread to form a nice groundcover which will persist over most of the winter.

Growing naturally in bogs, wet woods, floodplains and meadows in eastern North America, Golden Ragwort occurs in every county in Virginia. The plant thrives in full shade with acid, rich soil, in zones 3 to 9. Because it spreads easily by seed and underground roots, it can form large colonies and will grow under trees where nothing else thrives. In a woodland garden or a perennial border in the shade the masses of golden yellow look wonderful with Bluestar (*Amsonia tabernaemontana*) and Red Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*).



Small bees and flies that emerge early from winter homes are frequent visitors, feeding on nectar and carrying pollen to fertilize neighboring flowers. Among the insects, the green metallic sweat bee is more easily seen than the dull brown or black cuckoo bees and hoverflies. Deer avoid Golden Ragwort since the leaves contain toxic chemicals.

Two other species of this genus are common in the Coastal Plain. Woolly Ragwort (*P. tomentosa*) is a plant of the dunes, sandy clearings and roadsides and Small's Ragwort (*P. anonyma*) grows in dry fields, roadsides and disturbed habitats. There are differences in the stems and leaves of these 3 species, but where they grow is the best way to identify them.

Golden Ragwort is one of the herbs (ground and dissolved in alcohol) that are sold as Lydia Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, widely marketed as a cure for any "female complaint." A tea made from the root and leaves was used by American Indians, settlers and herbalists to treat delayed and irregular menses, leucorrhea and childbirth complications, leading to its alternate common name "squaw-weed." "Ragwort" means a plant with ragged leaves, and "wort" is an Old "English word for "plant".

The best place to buy these plants are local native plant sales, since it is not usually seen in commercial nurseries. Online sites such as North Creek Nurseries sell flats of seedlings. ❖

Photo: Golden Ragwort (*Packera aurea*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.