

The Spring Edition of “What’s That Plant?”

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

In past springs, people visiting the neighboring parks asked about the seasonal wildflowers. Many of these plants are spring ephemerals, meaning that they are perennials which begin emerging in the winter, bloom in the spring, and enter dormancy by early summer. This seasonal cycle lets the leaves absorb the most sunlight before trees fill with foliage and shade the forest floor.

Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) produces a white flower two inches across with a bright yellow center in early March. The blossom lasts only a day or two, but the foliage remains striking: the lobed leaf runs with orange sap such that when the leaf is pinched, it appears to bleed. Native Americans applied this poisonous ooze onto their skin as an insect repellent or as war paint. Some historians believe the term “redskin” came from the coloration imparted by the bloodroot. However, avoid exposing skin to the toxic sap. This plant grows in dry to semi-moist, fertile soil and makes an excellent addition to native gardens. A substance on the seeds attracts ants, enticing these insects to disperse the seeds.

Spring beauties (*Claytonia virginica*) frequently carpet Northern Virginian floodplains with tiny, light pink blossoms. Their leaves and buds may begin developing as early as late autumn. By April, the five-petaled flowers dot the ground. This diminutive plant belongs to the lily family.

Look for trout lilies (*Erythronium americanum*) sprouting in clusters along floodplains and stream banks. Its name comes from the spotted, five-inch-long leaves, which resemble trout’s skin. This slow growing plant must be at least seven years old before it sports a brilliant yellow flower—usually peaking in mid-April. Each year, its bulb penetrates deeper into the soil. Like the bloodroot, trout lilies can be purchased from native plant specialty retailers. If you are shopping for trout lilies, “dogtooth lilies” is another common name and the Appalachian species (*E. albidum*) blooms white.

Those intriguing plants with umbrella-shaped leaves atop foot-long stalks are mayapples (*Podophyllum peltatum*). A single, white flower—resembling an apple blossom—opens in May on mature specimens having split stems. An apple-like fruit ripens in June. All parts of the plant are poisonous except the toxicity significantly decreases only in fully ripened fruit. Since the fruit has a bland flavor, slimy texture, and many seeds, the mayapple plant is best appreciated for its unusual shape and soil-stabilizing rhizomes. If you see leafless mayapple stalks, chances are deer—which evolved to resist the plants’ poisons—browsed on the fleshy foliage. This adaptable plant prefers moist, rich soil.

Whereas the above highlighted plants are spring ephemerals, golden ragworts (*Packera aurea*) are spring-blooming evergreens. The leaves stand only about six inches tall, sometimes exhibiting purple undersides, yet the floral stems reach 18-24 inches before opening into a yellow blossom spray. Frequently, pale squiggles adorn the leaves thanks to leaf miners. This insect eats its way inside of the

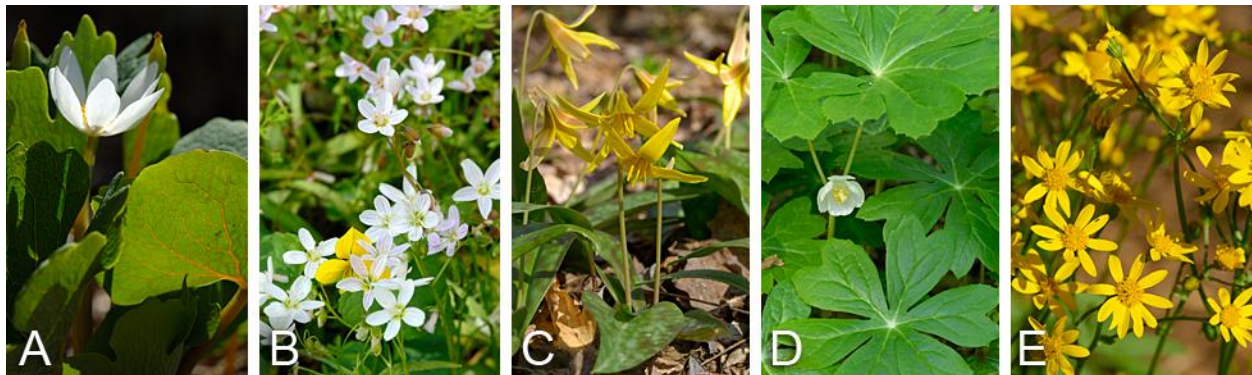


Figure 1. Spring wildflowers native to Northern Virginia include A) bloodroot, B) spring beauties, C) yellow trout lilies, D) mayapples, and E) golden ragwort.

thin leaf without causing the plant serious harm. Creeping mats of golden ragworts flourish along stream banks, but it is a versatile plant accepting many different soil conditions. In home gardens, it makes a wonderful groundcover substitute for non-native invasive [English ivy](#).

All of these plants naturally occur in parklands surrounding Royal Lake. Furthermore, all of these species were used at various Invasive Management Area (IMA) restoration sites and re-emerge year after year—and some are beginning to spread. In addition to habitat, food resource, and aesthetic value, these plants are tough, but not tough enough to withstand human encroachment. Dumping leaves and other yard debris in woodlands is detrimental to habitats. In addition to the non-native invasive plants and seeds, synthetic trash, and other contaminants that people do not notice in the yard debris mix, none of the native plants we just discussed can withstand dumping—even if the dumped debris is “spread around.” Best practice: mulch yard debris within your own property and use the compost on your gardens or bag yard debris for curbside pickup.

Speaking of invading into woodlands, two non-native invasive species eliciting springtime inquiries are [garlic mustard \(*Alliaria petiolata*\)](#) and [lesser celandine \(*Ranunculus ficaria*\)](#). Both of these bullies spread uncontrollably, use up space otherwise benefiting native plants, and offer little to no resources for wildlife. Native to Europe and Western Asia, lesser celandine has round, glossy leaves and low-to-the-ground bunches of yellow flowers. Its dense, earth-gripping roots make controlling by manual means difficult. Another European import, garlic mustard produces small white flowers on top of a one to three-foot-tall stalk (more about this biennial is in the June 2010 back issue article, [Invasive Species Profile: Garlic Mustard \[*Alliaria petiolata*\]](#)). The IMA program at Royal Lake always has an easy-to-pull garlic mustard eradication workday, this year (2012) on April 21st (see the announcement at the end for more details). Contact Greg Sykes at greg@grsykes.com and ask to be on the future workday volunteer list. While pulling weeds, volunteers frequently encounter the fascinating native plants and animals which directly benefit from the habitat restoration efforts!

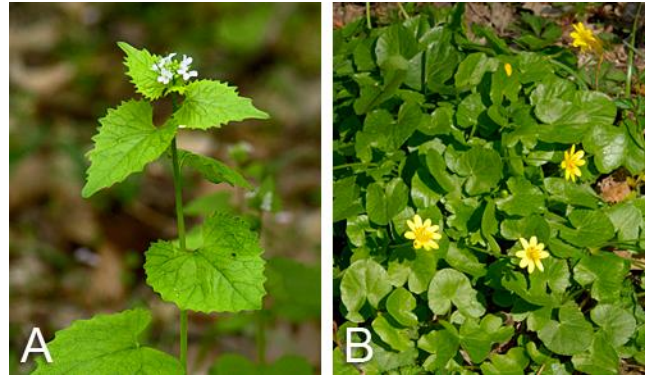


Figure 2. Two non-native invasive plants blooming in the spring are A) garlic mustard and B) lesser celandine.

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HUGE IMA Workday on April 21st

Come and celebrate Global Youth Service Day, Earth Week, and Take Back the Forest Month all at one time! Join us for a huge IMA workday on April 21st from 7:00-11:00 a.m. where we will eradicate garlic mustard and other non-native invasives from Royal Lake Park. We will meet at the Grassy Knoll entrance by the Gainsborough Drive/Claridge Court intersection (across the street from 5301 Gainsborough Drive). Participants must be healthy and 11+ years old (ages 11-15 need to bring a parent). All participants get a free T-shirt plus one lucky person who works the whole period could win the raffle! So that we have enough supplies, RSVP to greg@grsykes.com with the number in your party. Dress for the weather, wear long pants, bring work gloves, and sturdy boots. More information and a meeting location map are at <http://www.grsykes.com/ima-workday-announcements/>.