

Spring ephemerals, also called short-lived wildflowers, are a special group of plant species that play an important role in our northern forests.

Shortly after snowmelt and long before leaves on the trees are out, spring ephemerals take advantage of the high light conditions to quickly produce flowers and fruits and then die back into the ground until the following spring.

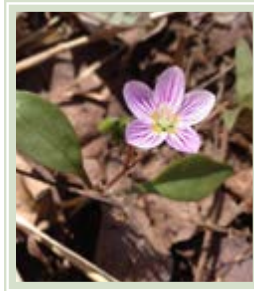
Even though they are only above the ground for 4-6 weeks, spring ephemerals play important roles in our forests and in the culture of many Native American tribes. They prevent soil nutrient loss, provide nectar for the bees and other insects that pollinate them and their underground plant organs provide food for small mammals. In addition, spring ephemeral species are widely used among tribes as food, medicine and dyes.

Most spring ephemerals flower between April and May. They are fairly easy to spot as they are usually the only green plants on the forest floor at that time of year.



Dutchman's breeches (left) and **squirrel corn** (below) are both related to the common garden plant known as bleeding heart. These plants have been used as medicine by several tribes. The

root tubers of both Dutchman's breeches and squirrel corn resemble corn (hence the name) and provide food for small mammals.



The flowers of the **spring beauty** (left) are white, with light pink to dark pink streaking on the petals. The tubers of spring beauty are also eaten by humans and other mammals

The flowers of **round-lobed hepatica** (right) vary from white to purple, and have dense hair along the stems and flower parts to prevent condensation, thus protecting the



plant from frost. Some tribes have used it as a medicine plant, and others, like the Potawatomi, have used the roots as a dye for baskets



Skunk cabbage (left) is the earliest plant species to flower in WI. The flower produces a smell similar to rotting

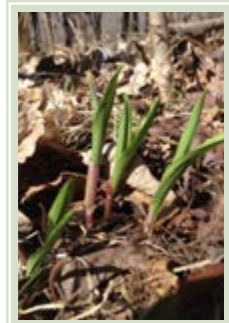
meat, which attracts certain species of flies to pollinate it. The process by which the plant produces this scent generates heat, which will melt any snow that is on top of the plant.

The **trout lily** (right) has mottled green leaves and yellow flowers. Some tribes have used this as a medicine. It accumulates nutrients in its leaves, returning them back to the soil when the leaves die back.



Cut-leaved toothwort (left) is a member of the mustard family and has been used as a medicine

Wild leek (right) sends up its leaves very early in the year, and uses energy captured by those leaves to send up flowers. A member of the onion family, tribes have used it as food.





Bloodroot (left) leaves cup around the stem, trapping warm air and protecting the stem from frost. Root was used as medicine and red dye.

When it has flowers, **large-flowered bellwort** (right) appears to be wilting, but after the flowers drop, the plant has a much more lush and robust appearance.



Wild ginger (below) has a red and cup-shaped flower. The flowers rest on the ground where they attract pollinators such as flies, beetles and ants.



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Often seen blanketing the landscape in spring, the petals of the **large-flowered trillium** (right) change from white to purple as the season progresses.



Marsh marigold (left) also known as cowslip, can be seen flowering during the spring in wet habitats. Hazardous to eat unless fully cooked.

Canada mayflower (right) is abundant in the forests of northern WI. The white flowers are fragrant and produce red fruits.



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Although it has been named for its fruits (inset), **blue-bead lily** (left) has colorful yellow flowers as well.

Other Spring Ephemerals not pictured:

Jack-in-the-pulpit, Violets and Virginia waterleaf

Additional Information available from:

FCP Natural Resources Department

Or website : <http://wisflora.herbarium.wisc.edu/>

Spring ephemerals and other spring wildflowers of northern Wisconsin:

A glimpse at some of nature's early risers



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