

Glorious April Flowers

by Jane Warren
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Many gardeners plant cheerful, bright-colored flowers such as crocuses, daffodils, and tulips as harbingers-of-spring. Why not add some early spring flowers that are native to Lexington? Three herbaceous perennial species with charming flowers that grow in woodlands and bloom around mid-April are described below. They all prefer soil rich in humus, moist, well-drained, and about neutral pH, but they can tolerate drier, less rich, soil.

Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) flowers are 1–2 inches across with 7–12 white petals and stunning yellow stamens (pollen sacs) in the middle. Bees are attracted to the bright color and pollinate the flowers despite the absence of nectar. This plants development is quite interesting. A single leaf and flower have separate stalks that arise from a horizontal, underground stem, the rhizome. The leaf encircles the flower stem. As the flower stem grows, the flower bud protrudes from the leaf, the flower opens, and then the leaf



unfurls. Bloodroots grow to a height of 6–10 inches. Over time, the rhizome spreads, making an attractive groundcover with large, dark green, round leaves with deep clefts that last through the summer. The stems and roots store deep red-orange juice, hence the name bloodroot.



Dutchman's breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*) are in the same genus as the more common wild bleeding heart (*D. eximia*). Two to 6 flowers hang upside down from short slender stalks (pedicels) on stems 4–8 inches long. Each flower is about 3/4 of an inch long; it has 2 white outer petals and 2 yellow inner petals that are smaller and curl upward. The flowers have an unusual shape like upside-down baggy trousers, thus the name Dutchmans breeches. The nectar of the flowers attracts several kinds of long-tongued bees and some butterflies, but only the bees are effective pollinators. The flowers last 2–3 weeks and the leaves another few weeks and then disappear until the next spring. The fern-like leaves are about 10 inches high.

Flowers of **sharp-lobed hepatica** (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *acuta*) have 6 petal-like sepals that can be white, pink, or lavender and are about 1 inch in diameter. Many striking white stamens surround clusters of green carpels (female parts) in the middle of the flower. The flower stems are 3–6 inches tall. Bees, flies, beetles, moths, and butterflies pollinate the flowers. The evergreen leaves are divided into 3 pointed lobes about 3 inches across on stalks up to 6 inches in length. As the leaves age red-brown patches appear on them. They persist through the winter lying limply on the ground. The new bright green leaves appear after the flowers develop. The name, hepatica, comes from the dark color and shape of the leaves that are reminiscent of the liver. In the 1800s, based on the assumption that the liver-like leaves would be effective in treating liver diseases, tons of hepatica leaves were gathered to make medicine. In the past, many species of native plants have been taken for medicinal purposes.



Seeds of the three species described here and thousands of others species are dispersed by ants. A fleshy structure (elaiosome) that contains fat and proteins is attached to each seed and attracts ants to it. The ant takes the seed to its nest and feeds the elaiosome to larvae. After the larvae consume the elaiosome, the ant takes the seed to the waste pile, rich in nutrients, and the seed germinates there.

If you are interested in purchasing any of these spring plants, there are several options. The New England Wild Flower Society's Garden in the Woods in Framingham will start selling spring plants on April 15 and may have these plants in stock. Two nearby garden stores that sell some herbaceous native plants, Russell's Garden Center on Rte. 20 in Wayland and Mahoney's on Rte. 3 in Winchester, might have one or more of these species later in the spring.

Additional plant nurseries are listed in the Plant Materials Guide for Lexington. Paper copies of the Plant Materials Guide are available at the Conservation Department in the Town Office Building.