

# Bloodroot

*Sanguinaria canadensis*

by Barbara Nuffer

The white blossom of the bloodroot is one of the first flowers to greet us when we walk in the woods in early spring. Bloodroot is a native wildflower that blooms in mid-April in New York's rich, acidic woodlands. As it emerges through the forest's leaf litter, the single flower stem is surrounded by the developing leaf.



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This beautiful flower has 8 to 12 white petals with a bright yellow center and can measure up to two inches across.

Unfortunately, the flower is very short-lived, lasting for several days at most. However, rainy weather can cause the petals to drop off in a single day. Like other ephemeral wildflowers, bloodroot blooms, attracts pollinators, and sets its seed before the deciduous trees have leafed out. By late spring, bloodroot plants are dormant and disappear entirely until the following spring.

***The men would apply the red juice to their palms and shake hands with the woman they wanted to marry.***

The seed is produced in an oblong seed pod that ripens in late spring. The pod opens up and the seeds spring out below the plant. The fleshy coating surrounding the seed attracts ants, which carry the seeds into their nest to feed their larvae. The seeds germinate in the nutrient-rich debris of the ant nest. This process serves to disperse the seeds away from the mother plant.

Bloodroot is a member of the poppy family. Like all poppies, the rhizome (a horizontal underground stem) contains powerful and potentially dangerous compounds. The rhizome produces a red juice that was used by Native Americans as a body paint and dye. Native Americans also used bloodroot as a treatment for various ailments, ranging from fevers and bronchitis to warts. It



was valued as a love charm by the bachelors of Nebraska's Ponca tribe. The men would apply the red juice to their palms and shake hands with the woman they wanted to marry. According to legend, the girl would be a willing partner within a week.

There is a beautiful garden selection of this native plant, known as the double bloodroot. It blooms a few days later than the single-flowered bloodroot and the flowers last about twice as long. Although expensive and hard to find, these plants are very long-lived and can be divided every three to four years.

The bloodroot's solitary leaf bud emerging from the ground is distinctively shaped and serves as your first hint that the flower will soon make an appearance. Remember, you must be vigilant to spot this plant in flower. So be sure to mark its appearance in mid-April on your calendar if you want to share in the beauty of this fleeting wildflower.

Wildflower enthusiast **Barbara Nuffer** works in DEC's Division of Air Resources in Albany.