



Red Trillium

Trillium erectum

Barbara Nuffer

By Barbara Nuffer

It's hard to believe that a beautiful, dainty, maroon flower of the forest understory could have a nickname like "stinking Benjamin," but it does. In fact, this native plant, officially known as the red trillium, has a number of different common names,

cells of the ovary, and ribs of the berries. Trilliums are members of the lily family with eight species found in New York. The red trillium thrives in cool, rich forests across the state. Occasionally, a white-flowered red trillium is found, which should not be mis-

attracts certain pollinating insects. In the case of the red trillium, pollen is present, but not nectar. Carrion flies are attracted to two features of the flower that are reminiscent of decaying meat: the red color and the foul odor. These unique character-

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all of which reveal valuable information about the plant's nature. "Wake robin," for instance, describes the plant's maroon flowers blooming early in the spring, like red-breasted robins returning from their wintering grounds. "Birthroot" was coined because Native Americans used a tea brewed from the roots to induce labor and, yes, "stinking Benjamin" refers to the flower's unpleasant odor.

The famous Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus gave the plant the genus name "trillium" (from the Latin prefix "tri," meaning three) because it has three of each of the following: leaf, sepal, flower petal,

taken for the larger-flowered white trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*), the emblem of our northern neighbor, Ontario.

The red trillium is listed on New York State's Protected Native Plant List. It cannot be "picked, plucked, severed, removed, damaged, or carried away" without consent of the landowner. A more natural protection from picking is the nodding habit of the flowers, which tends to keep them hidden.

Usually, the fragrance of a flower advertises the pollen and nectar found within. The chemistry of each floral scent, as well as the flower's unique color scheme,

istics ensure both pollination and the production of seeds. In addition, bumblebees also collect the flower's golden pollen.

In early spring, remember to look carefully around the forest floor for the distinctive three leaves of the red trillium. If your timing is right, you will find a garnet-colored treasure nodding its colorful head towards the ground. Just be sure to keep your nose a safe distance away from the distinctive fragrance and a possible bumblebee!

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