



Wild Geranium

(*Geranium maculatum*)

By Barbara Nuffer—photos by author

In late spring, the delicate, rosy-purple flowers of the wild geranium brighten up the sun-dappled edges of New York's roads, woods and meadows. Seeing them can remind you of the common annual red, pink and white flowering plants so often used in window boxes and planters.

Members of the same family as "true geraniums" (Geraniaceae), wild geraniums are North American natives, found in acidic soils from Maine, south to Georgia, and west to Kansas. They are perennial wildflowers that reach one to two feet in height and have one-inch-wide, five-petaled flowers in shades of pink and purple. The plant's leaves are deeply cut and palmately lobed, referring to the leaf's shape resembling a person's hand with the fingers spread out.

An interesting feature of wild geraniums is that the petals change color as they age. The petals also have transparent lines on them that act as nectar guides, leading insects to the center of

the flower. In addition, the pollen is a beautiful blue color, and the leaves turn into beautiful stained glass-like shades of red and orange in the fall.

Wild geraniums have a unique method of seed dispersal: as the seedpod dries, it curls and shoots seeds into the air. Each small brown seed has a tail, which curls when dry



and straightens when wet, moving the seed along the ground and eventually enabling it to burrow into the soil. Germination can take several months. The shape of the pointed seedpod gives the wild geranium its common name, cranesbill.

Native Americans used dried wild geranium roots on bleeding wounds to promote coagulation. Tea made from roots was used to treat sore throat, thrush, mouth ulcers and diarrhea. The plant's medicinal properties are due to the high level of tannic acid in the root, which is high enough that the root was even used to tan hides.

This year, as you walk through a colorful meadow in New York, take note of the elegant blossoms of the wild geranium. Or, consider treating yourself to one of the many garden varieties of geranium to enjoy at your home all summer long.

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