

SPRING BEAUTY: THE FAIRY SPUD

When wildflower enthusiasts seek out the first wildflowers of spring, they usually go directly to the woods. Although most of our early wildflowers are found in the woods, some of those flowers may also be found in open areas. One of those flowers is the Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica* L.).

Spring Beauty is a member of the Purslane Family (*Portulacaceae*). Its generic name, *Claytonia*, was named for John Clayton, an 18th Century Virginia physician and botanist. Clayton had donated many of Virginia's plant specimens to Dutch naturalist, Johan (Jan) Frederik Gronovius, for his publication, *Flora Virginica*. Its specific epithet, *virginica*, was named for the Colony of Virginia. Other common names for this plant are Claytonia, Fairy Spud, Good Morning Spring, Grass Flower, Ground Nut, Mayflower, Musquash, Narrow-leaved Spring Beauty, Patience, Quaker Ladies, Virginia Spring Beauty, and Wild Potato.

Edible Uses of the Spring Beauty

The Spring Beauty is an edible plant. Both man and beast may eat the leaves and the tubers (or corms). Both the Native Americans and the European settlers ate parts of this plant.

Livestock and the White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus* [Boddaert]) eat the leaves as well as the stems and the flowers. Humans can eat the young leaves raw as salad greens or can boil the older leaves as potherbs.

The starchy tubers can be eaten raw or cooked. If eaten raw, they will taste like radishes. If cooked, they will taste like baked potatoes or roasted chestnuts.

Before eating, the tubers should be thoroughly washed and brushed. If cooked, their outer layer jacket should remain until ready to eat.

If boiled, the tuber should be boiled in salt water for about 10-15 minutes. If roasted, the tuber should be heated until it is warm. After cooking these tubers, their outer layer jacket may be peeled.

The Spring Beauty does have some nutrition value. It contains vitamins A and C.

Because the Spring Beauty is a small plant, it takes a lot of plants and lot of effort to harvest enough parts to make a meal. Therefore, it is best to harvest this plant only from areas where there is an abundant supply of these plants and only take the largest tubers.

Aside from humans, several species of animals will eat the tubers. Rodents (*Rodenta*), such as the Eastern Chipmunk (*Tamias striatus* [L.]) and the White-footed Mouse (*Peromyscus leucopus* [Rafinesque]), will dig up and eat these tubers. A few species of birds, such as the Eastern Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris* Vieillot), will also dig up and eat these tubers.

Other Uses of the Spring Beauty

The Spring Beauty did have some medicinal uses. The Iroquois Tribes used the powdered roots as a cold concoction or as a cold infusion for treating convulsions.

Unlike most living organisms, the Spring Beauties have an unstable number of chromosomes, sometimes having up about 50 different combinations. (A normal human

cell has 46 chromosomes.) Because of these varying numbers, geneticists like to study the Spring Beauty.

A Story of the Spring Beauty

There is a Chippewa story about how the Spring Beauty was created. The Chippewa Tribe, who resided in the northern Great Lakes region, is closely related to the Ottawa Tribe, who resided in parts of northwestern Ohio.

The Spring Beauty

An old man was sitting in his lodge by the side of a frozen stream. It was the end of winter, the air was not so cold, and his fire was nearly out. He was old and alone. His locks were white with age, and he trembled in every joint. Day after day passed, and he heard nothing but the sound of the storm sweeping before it the new-fallen snow.

One day while his fire was dying, a handsome young man approached and entered his lodge. His cheeks were red, his eyes sparkled. He walked with a quick, light step. His forehead was bound with a wreath of sweet-grass, and he carried a bunch of fragrant flowers in his hand

“Ah, my son,” said the old man, “I am happy to see you. Come in! Tell me your adventures, and what strange lands you have seen. I will tell you of my wonderful deeds and what I can perform. You shall do the same, and we will amuse each other.

The old man then drew from a bag a curiously wrought pipe. He filled it with mild tobacco, and handed it to his guest. They each smoked from the pipe and then began their stories.

“I am Peboan, the Spirit of Winter,” said the old man. “I blow my breath, and the streams become still. The water becomes stiff and hard as clear stone.”

“I am Seegwun, the Spirit of Spring,” answered the youth. “I breathe, and the flowers spring up in the meadows and woods.”

“I shake my locks,” said the old man, “and snow covers the land. The leaves fall from trees, and my breath blows them away. The birds fly to a distant land, and the animals hide themselves from the cold.”

“I shake my ringlets,” said the young man, “and warm showers of soft rain fall upon the earth. The flowers lift their heads from the ground, the grass grows thick and green. My voice recalls the birds and they come flying joyfully from the Southland. The warmth of my breath unbinds the streams, and they sing the songs of summer. Music fills the groves where-ever I walk, and all nature rejoices.”

And while they were talking thus a wonderful change took place. The sun began to rise. A gentle warmth stole over the place. Peboan, the Spirit of Winter, became silent. His head drooped, and the snow outside melted away. Seegwun, the Spirit of Spring, grew more radiant, and rose joyfully to his feet. The robin and the bluebird began to sing on the top of the lodge. The stream began to murmur at the door, and the fragrance of opening flowers came softly on the breeze.

The lodge faded away, and Peboan sank down and dissolved into tiny streams of water, that vanished under the brown leaves of the forest. Thus the Spirit of Winter departed, and where he had melted away, there the Indian children gathered the first blossoms, fragrant and delicately pink---the modest Spring Beauty.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SPRING BEAUTY

Perennial

Height: 3-12 inches. The plant continues to grow after flowering.

Stem: The stems are narrow, erect or decumbent, slender, smooth, glabrous, succulent, weak, and are light or red-green.

Leaves: The stem leaves are simple, opposite, sessile, elongated, and linear. Each stem has only 1 pair of leaves. Those leaves are located midway up the stem and below the flower cluster. Sometimes, there may be 1-2 basal leaves.

Each leaf is smooth, dark green, fleshy, thick, and succulent. Its length is about 2-8 inches long and its width is about $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ inch wide. Its margin is smooth and the leaf tapers at both ends. Each leaf also has a single midvein.

Flowers: The flowers are arranged in a loose, umbelled, racemous, nodding cluster. Each cluster may have about 5-20 flowers. The bottom flowers in the cluster bloom first and the top flowers bloom last.

Each flower is about $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wide, is radially symmetrical, and is fragrant. Each flower has 5 white to rose or pink petals with darker rose or pink veins; 2 green, leafy persistent sepals; 5 golden yellow stamens with pink anthers, which are located opposite each petal; and 1 pistil with a 3-lobed stigma and a 3-cleft style.

This plant may not flower every year. To avoid self-pollination, the stamens usually mature before the pistil.

Before the flowers bloom, their stalks are drooping or sagging. While the flowers are blooms, the stalks become erect. After the flowers have bloomed, the stalks wilt.

These flowers open in the sunlight and close at night or on clouded days. Sometimes, the flower may open and close several times in a single day. This keeps the pollen dry. A single flower may bloom for about 3 days before it dies and is then replaced by another flower.

These flowers are insect pollinated. The petals' veins and the stamens' filaments reflect ultraviolet light. Because most insects can see ultraviolet light, these flower parts will guide the insects to the flowers' nectaries.

Flowering season is usually February to June. They are one of our first spring wildflowers. The above ground parts of the plant usually die out by summer but the underground parts remain alive year-round.

Fruit: The fruit is a globose or ovate pod or a capsule that is enclosed within the calyx. It has 3 inrolling valves near the top, which splits the capsule into 3 sections and ejects the seeds for distances of up to 2 feet. Each capsule is about $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and may have 3-6 dark red, shiny seeds. Fruiting season is usually in the early summer.

Roots: The root systems consist of bulbous tubers or corms. When young, these tubers or corms are rounded and have a diameter of about $\frac{1}{4}$ - 2 inches. As they age, they become more irregular-shaped. They are usually buried about 3-5 inches underground.

Habitat: Their habitats vary greatly, but mainly consist of moist woods, thickets, ditches, clearings, meadows, lawns, and waste areas. These flowers are usually found in large carpeted patches.

Range: Its range covers much of the eastern U.S. and southeastern Canada.

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