

Spring Ephemerals

A Field Guide for Massachusetts

by Karro Frost and Robert Wernerehl



Wood Anemone

Anemone quinquefolia

Single flowers with typically 5 white petal-like sepals, 1 inch wide, above 3 whorled leaves, each with 3–5 leaflets, some of which are sharply lobed. Edges of the leaflets are toothed. Plant height 2–10 inches.



Wild Columbine

Aquilegia canadensis

Not a true spring ephemeral, as its leaves last all summer. Red and yellow bell-shaped flowers with 5 upright red spurs. Flowers are up to 2 inches long including spurs. Leaves are divided into 3 stalked oval leaflets. Plant height ranges from 12 to 36 inches.



Wild Ginger

Asarum canadense

Deep maroon flowers, with 3 triangular petal-like sepals forming an open tube found at the base of the plant under the leaves. Leaves are heart-shaped on thick, pubescent stems, arising in clusters from the ground. It grows to 8 inches tall, and its leaves stay green throughout the summer.

Cut-leaved Toothwort

Cardamine concatenata

Flowers have 4 white (occasionally pink) petals in a raceme above the leaves. Flowers are $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ inch across. It has 3 whorled, highly divided leaves each with 3–5 narrow leaflets that have sharply toothed edges. Plant height 4–16 inches.



Two-leaved Toothwort

Cardamine diphylla

Flowers have 4 white (occasionally pink) petals in a raceme above the leaves. It has 2 opposite leaves with 3 broad leaflets each, which are coarsely toothed. Plant height 6–12 inches.



Three-leaved Toothwort

Cardamine maxima

Similar to the two-leaved toothwort with 4 white (occasionally pink) flowers in a raceme above the leaves, this species usually has 3 alternating leaves, each divided into 3 crossly toothed broad leaflets. The edges of the leaves are fringed with tiny hairs. Plant height 6–16 inches.



Marsh Marigold

Caltha palustris

Large bright yellow flowers with 5–9 petal-like sepals (1½ inch wide) in clusters on stems above the leaves. The large leaves are rounded and heart-shaped with the indent at the stem. The leaves are 1–5 inches long/wide and are finely toothed. Plant of wetlands. Plant height 6 to 24 inches.



Photos by Karro Frost and Robert Wernerehl



Early Blue Cohosh

Caulophyllum giganteum

Only recently identified as a separate species from blue cohosh. It blooms before its leaves have started to expand. It has clusters of 5–18 flowers each with 6 purple sepals $\frac{1}{4}$ inch long. Its leaves are alternate and divided into rounded leaflets. Plant height can reach 3 feet.



Blue Cohosh

Caulophyllum thalictroides

Similar to early blue cohosh. The yellowish green flowers open as the leaves are expanding. The sepals are less than $\frac{1}{4}$ inch in length. The flower clusters can have 5 to 70 flowers. The leaves are alternate along the stem, divided into 3 or more rounded leaflets. Plants can reach 3 feet in height.



Spring Beauty

Claytonia caroliniana

The 5 white-to-pink petals with pink lines radiate out from the center. Flowers are in racemes above leaves, each $\frac{1}{2}$ inch wide. Leaves are opposite and simple oval-shaped, 1–3 inches long, with a distinct stem (petiole) and typically a half inch to a full inch wide. Plant height 2–10 inches.



Narrow-leaved Spring Beauty

Claytonia virginica

Endangered in Massachusetts. Similar to the more common Spring Beauty, with 5-petaled white-to-pink flowers. The opposite leaves below the flower raceme are linear up to 6 inches long, 8 or more times as long as wide. Plant height 2–10 inches.

Squirrel Corn

Dicentra canadensis

Pale yellow-to-white flowers with upright parallel lobes (spurs) in a raceme above the leaves. The flowers are up to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long. The bluish green leaves are highly divided giving a feathery appearance. Leaves are basal, growing straight from the ground without a mainstem. Plant height 4–12 inches.



Dutchman's Breeches

Dicentra cucullaria

White flowers with 2 upright lobes (spurs) angling away from each other on a raceme above the leaves. Each flower is $\frac{3}{4}$ inch long. The leaves are similar to squirrel corn, bluish green, with a feathery appearance. Leaves and flower stems grow only from base of plant. Plant height 4–12 inches.



Trout Lily

Erythronium americanum

Nodding flowers with 6 yellow, petal-like tepals (anatomically a combination of petals and sepals, common in the lily family) with either yellow or red pollen on anthers in the center. Flowers are up to 2 inches wide. Leaves are basal only, oval and are green mottled with brown and whitish spots, as a trout might be. Plant height 4–10 inches.



Sharp-lobed Hepatica

Hepatica acutiloba

Blue, white, or pink flowers with 5–12 petals, with soft hairs on the stems and buds, each arising on its own stem from the ground. The flowers open on sunny days, and close at night and on rainy days. The leathery leaves are partially divided into 3 lobes with their tips sharply pointed. Plant height 2–8 inches.



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Blunt-lobed Hepatica

Hepatica americana

Flowers are similar to sharp-lobed hepatica, usually in clusters, soft hairs cover the flowering stems and bracts. Its leathery leaves have 3 rounded lobes and are often burgundy-colored in the spring. Each flower stalk and leaf arises on its own stem. Plant height 2–8 inches.



Virginia Waterleaf

Hydrophyllum virginianum

White-to-lavender flowers in a coiled cluster on a stalk above the leaves. Each $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{3}{8}$ inch wide. Distinctly shaped leaves are 4–8 inches long, alternate along the stem. They are deeply divided into 3–7 toothed leaflets, often with white mottling appearing as though flecked with water. Plant height 1–2 feet.



Miterwort or Bishop's Cap

Mitella diphylla

Tiny fringed 5-petaled flowers on an open spike above a pair of opposite oval leaves. Flowers are only $\frac{1}{8}$ – $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide. It is usually found on or near rocks along streams or seeps. Plant height 3–18 inches.



Naked Bishop's Cap

Mitella nuda

Delicate 5-parted flowers, $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide, on a spike. This blooms slightly later than miterwort, but still is usually in seed at the end of June. It has 5 small, greenish sepals with 5 greenish petals that look like a feathery fan sticking out between the sepals. This species is most common in mossy wetlands in Berkshire County. Plant height 3–12 inches.

Sweet Cicely

Osmorhiza claytonii

Tiny white flowers 1/8 inch wide in an open umbel. Leaves are alternate and divided into fern-like leaflets. The stem is densely covered with soft fine hairs. A related species, long-styled sweet cicely, has hairless stems except at the nodes. Plant height 1–3 feet.



Dwarf Ginseng

Panax trifolius

Small white flowers in a rounded cluster above the whorled leaves. The whorled leaves are divided into 3–5 palmate oval leaflets, 1–2 inches long. Note: the roots of dwarf ginseng are not valued, sold, or used for the same purposes as its much larger cousin, American ginseng. Plant height 4–8 inches.



Bloodroot

Sanguinaria canadensis

Single flower with 6–12 white petals on a stem directly from the ground. A single leaf grows from base of plant, initially wrapping around flowering stalk. The leaf is simple with lobes along its outer edge. Leaves and flowers are basal, growing from single stems at the base of the plant. Leaves can last through the summer. Plant height 2–12 inches.



Rue Anemone

Thalictrum thalictroides

Look for 1–6 flowers with 6–10 white petal-like sepals, 3/4 inch wide, in an umbel-like cluster above the whorl of leaves on the flower stem. Basal stalked leaves also occur and are divided into 3 groups of 3 rounded leaflets each with wide teeth at their outer edges. Plant height 4–8 inches.





Large-flowered Bellwort

Uvularia grandiflora

Drooping leaves and flowers distinguish this species. Bright yellow, 6-petaled flowers are 1–2 inches long, as single flowers or in small clusters. Petals (technically tepals) are smooth inside, twisted at their tips. The leaves are 2½–5 inches long, whitish underneath, and appear to be pierced by the stem. There are 1 or 2 leaves below the fork in the stem. Plant height 8–24 inches.



Perfoliate Bellwort

Uvularia perfoliata

Similar to large-flowered bellwort with pale yellow 6-petaled flowers, ¾–1¼ inches long. Petals (technically tepals) are roughened with yellow or orange grains on inside. Linear leaves are 1½–4 inches long; pierced by stem, with 1–4 leaves below the stem fork. Plant height 8–16 inches.



Nodding Trillium

Trillium cernuum

White 3-petaled flower with 3 green sepals on a single flower tucked under the 3 broadly oval leaves. Flowers are 1–2 inches wide; the leaves are 2½–4 inches long. Flower petals are recurved at the tips and may be lightly striped with pink lines. Plant height 8–20 inches.



Red Trillium

Trillium erectum

Also known as wake robin. Three red-to-maroon petals with 3 green sepals, all the same length and sharply pointed. The flowers are 1–3 inches wide, slightly nodding, above 3 stemless, broad diamond-shaped leaves, each 2–8 inches long. Smells like rotting meat. Plant height is 8–24 inches. Occasionally a white form is found.

Painted Trillium

Trillium undulatum

Upright white flower with 3 petals and 3 green sepals; petals are streaked in the center with dark pink, 1½–2½ inches wide. Flower is on stem above three oval 2–5-inch-long leaves on short stems. Plant height 8–20 inches.



Canada Violet

Viola canadensis

This violet has 5 white petals, often pale lavender on back, with a yellow throat. Like all violets, the flower is bilaterally symmetrical, with each half a mirror image of the other vertically. Flower width is 1 inch, leaves are finely toothed and heart-shaped, 2–4 inches long. Leaves and flowers are attached to an aerial stem. Plant height 8–16 inches.



Long-spurred Violet

Viola rostrata

A small, pale purple violet, with a ½ inch long spur behind the flower. Hairless side and lowest petals striped with dark purple. Flowers grow on a long stem from axils of the leaves with small, fringed bracts (stipules) at the axil. Leaves are heart-shaped, and alternate on the stem. Plant height 2–8 inches.



Round-leaved Violet

Viola rotundifolia

One of the 2 early yellow-flowered violets. Unlike the other violets above, these have leaves and flowers emerging directly from the ground, without a central stem. The leaves are broadly oval, indented at the stem end. These rounded leaves will continue growing throughout the season, often lying on the ground. Plant height is 2–5 inches. Smooth yellow violet (*Viola eriocarpa*; not shown) has a stem and grows up to 12 inches tall.

