

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

The dull brown and mustard tones of winter are about to give way to the rainbow of spring! And they're blooming earlier these days than they did hundreds of years ago. Early spring has a variety of negative consequences for pollinators and birds, just to name a few. But we may as well appreciate these tiny native flowers and the joy of renewal through their blooming, whenever it occurs. Why not go for a drive or take a walk along the trail?

According to the Arkansas Department of Transportation, "approximately 1,000 miles of Highways have been included in a system of Wildflower Routes to showcase existing wildflower populations. Maintenance practices along these routes allow annual and perennial wildflowers to prosper and return year after year." These routes are available from ArkansasHighways.com, and to name just a few: Highway 412 in Benton County, Interstate 540 in Washington County, and Highway 62 in Carroll County (sponsored by the Eureka Springs Garden Club Wildflower Project). But it's worth noting that many of the species of flowers intentionally planted along these routes, like Ox-Eyed Daisy and Dames Rocket, are not native. They do grow wild, and some of them do harm native plant and pollinator communities by spreading uncontrollably. On these drives, take the opportunity to learn about the flowers and spot which ones are native.

The tiniest people among us – children – make great flower detectives, because our native flowers are often hidden in the grass. Some are smaller than a finger tip! It's best to be close to the ground, on our knees if necessary, to peak through the brush and hunt for color.

Some of these tiny gems include the spring beauty, grape hyacinth, buttercup, violet, and small bluet, among dozens of others. A handy field guide can help identify the blooms. I use *Missouri Wildflowers* by Edgar Denison and the Missouri Department of Conservation. According to this guide, Spring Beauties will bloom from February through May, and describes them as "the most widely distributed early spring flower." Color seems to vary, but they tend to be white with pink veins on five petals. Sometimes the petals can look pink or lavender. Native Americans once ate the roots, and the spring beauty's leaves are also edible. Scott D. Appell wrote an article for the Brooklyn Botanical Garden explaining why people ate the roots: "this low-growing plant has tiny underground tubers that can be prepared and eaten just like potatoes. Indeed, another common name for the spring beauty is the 'fairy spud.' Both the Iroquois and Algonquin dined on the boiled or roasted tubers of *Claytonia virginica*." They really are like stars on earth, having dropped from the heavens to herald the spring. One could imagine fairies having something to do with it, too. Visit the BBG.org for more details about growing your own spring beauties indoors and cooking with their roots! Be careful not to harvest too many wildflowers, though – in Massachusetts, the spring beauty is listed by the USDA as endangered.

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