

Flowers That Are Here and Gone
By Susan Camp

Last Sunday, I walked outside to look at the condition of the herb garden after some of the coldest winter weather in years. I was pleased to see new green leaves on the sage. The oregano, marjoram, and lemon balm will require a severe haircut, but the parsley is green, though floppy. Overall, the herb garden looks healthy. Then I spotted a touch of green peeping out from the dry, brown oak leaves that collected in the bed over the winter. The first of the spring weeds has shown up, common chickweed (*Stellaria media*), to be specific.

In a few weeks, the first dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*) will pop up, then the little chicken-beaked henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule*) and the nodding heads of purple dead-nettle (*Lamium purpureum*), followed by wild violets (*Viola* spp.), and gardeners everywhere on the Middle Peninsula will be attacking their garden beds and fields with rakes and hoes and spray bottles of organic herbicide to combat the armies of small, weedy, invasive soldiers marching across the landscape.

While we gardeners are busy waging the war on weeds, we can easily miss one of the loveliest surprises of late winter and early spring: the appearance of spring ephemerals, the dainty flowers that last only a few days to a few weeks and then disappear until next year.

The spring ephemeral phenomenon sounds almost magical, but there is a plausible scientific explanation. Most ephemerals are small shade plants that live in forested areas. They emerge in late winter or early spring while the trees are still bare and complete their life cycle during that short period.

They bloom, are pollinated by specialized ants and beetles, then produce and drop seeds which are disseminated by the ants, thus ensuring a new crop of ephemerals next spring. Once the leaves appear on the trees, the ephemerals die to the ground and are covered by leaves and other forest debris. Most ephemerals are perennials with bulbs, corms, or rhizomes that serve as underground storage units for nutrients.

Numerous ephemerals appear in Virginia during late winter to early spring, but you might have to travel to another region of the Commonwealth to view the breathtaking Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*). While it isn't entirely impossible to grow them on the Middle Peninsula, you will be more likely to find them in the Northern Piedmont. A weekend trip to view Virginia bluebells, with their pinkish-purple buds and bright blue tubular flowers surrounded by bright green leaves would be worth your time. Bumble and other bees, butterflies, moths, and hummingbirds flock to these lovely flowers.

A pretty ephemeral that does grow in our region is Virginia spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*), which can be found in thickets and old fields. The five-petaled flowers are pink or white with darker pink stripes. The slender, dark green leaves remain until late spring. The underground corms have a chestnut-like flavor and can be cooked as a potato substitute.

Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) is a perennial that grows in woods and thickets and along streams throughout the eastern United States. In the spring, the 6-to-10-inch flower stalk emerges, wrapped by a single grayish-green leaf that unfurls when the flower blooms. One white many-petaled flower with a bright yellow center blooms on each stalk. The flowers live one to two days, but the leaves will continue to grow until late summer. Bloodroot gets its name from the poisonous reddish-orange sap in the rhizome, which was used as a dye by Native Americans.

Numerous spring ephemerals grow in our woods. As the days become warmer, you can look for emerging leaves and stems in thickets and on the forest floor. Tread lightly, and don't dig up wildflowers; take pictures instead. Many ephemerals will grow in home gardens, but you need to purchase them from reputable dealers.

See articles on spring ephemerals at the Virginia Native Plant Society, Blandy Experimental Farm, and Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder websites.