

The Herb Society of America's

Notable Native™ Herb 2020

Claytonia virginica L., Spring beauty



Family: **Montiaceae** (Miner's lettuce family)

Latin Name: *Claytonia virginica* L.; 27 species in North America

Common Names: Spring beauty

Growth: Herbaceous perennial; ephemeral; colonizing

Hardiness: Zones 2-8, by species

Light: Shade to full sun

Soil: Moist rich soil, though can tolerate drier soils

Water: Moderate rainfall

Use: Culinary; ornamental; medicinal

Propagation: Seed, tubers

Claytonia virginica, Spring beauty.
©Katherine Schlosser, Feb. 15, 2019.

History

Linnaeus named the genus to honor John Clayton (1686-1773), who came to Virginia from England in 1705. The specific epithet recognizes the area, Virginia, from which Clayton collected the specimens which found their way to Linnaeus via his friend, English naturalist Mark Catesby (1863-1749).

Description

The leaves of *Claytonia virginica*, usually one pair per stem about half-way up the stem are shaped like a blade of grass but with a petiole (leaf stalk), though it is not clearly defined. The leaf veins are difficult to see as well. The flowers have five white petals with pink

veining guiding to the center of the flower. The five stamens have white or pink filaments and pink anthers.

Identification

There are 27 species of fibrous-rooted annuals as well as tuberous, stoloniferous, rhizomatous, and caudicose perennials, in the genus *Claytonia* which are indigenous to eastern Asia and North America. In North America, they range from Alaska and the Yukon Territory in the Northwest to Georgia in the Southeast.

A well-studied aneuploid complex exists within *C. virginica* and is of particular interest to geneticists because the species has an inconsistent number of chromosomes.

The easiest way to distinguish *C. virginica* from *Claytonia caroliniana* is by observing the leaves. Mature *C. virginica* has two long, narrow leaves while immature *C. virginica* will produce only one leaf. *Claytonia caroliniana* has broad, oval leaves.

Two *Claytonia* species have yellow petals: *C. virginica* var. *lutea* grows only in Bucks and Chester Counties in PA. and Harford Co. in adjoining MD.



Claytonia arkansana, Ozark spring beauty.
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The yellow petals have pink stripes, pink filaments and anthers.

C. virginica var. *hammondiae* grows only in Sussex County in northwest New Jersey. The flower petals are yellow without pink stripes.

An unusual species, *C. perfoliata*, known as Miner's lettuce, is an annual with what appears to be a single round leaf with the flower stem growing from the center. They are actually two opposite leaves that have joined. The flowers, often growing in a raceme above the leaf, are from 1/8 to 1/4 inch wide, as seen in the following photo. *C. perfoliata* is native to our Western states, especially WA, OR, CA, NV, AZ.



Claytonia caroliniana. ©Clownfeet.
iNaturalist. CC BY-NC 4.0



Claytonia perfoliata, ©Thomas Stoughton, iNaturalist. CC BY-NC 4.0

The other 23 species have petals varying from white to pink to crimson, with or without pink veining. The species vary in size, leaf shape, and other characters as well as great differences in habitat requirements, from moist and shady to hot and dry.

Thomas Stoughton graciously gave his permission to use his photographs, more of which can be found on iNaturalist.org. He also has a website with lots of information on Western *Claytonia* species (<https://claytonia.org>).

A fascinating article on the floral color of *Claytonia* species was written by Frank Frey (see references).

Culture & Habitat

Claytonia virginica is a native of woodlands, valleys, meadows, prairies, and dry upland woods.

Best grown in full sun to part shade, it does best in organically rich, moist, fertile soils. It tolerates drier soils once mature. Naturalizes easily in favorable conditions.

Other species vary widely in habitat needs, from rich soil to dry sandy, rocky sites. Altitude differences vary by species as well.

You can determine which species are

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native in your area by visiting <https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=CLAYT>

Native bees, bumblebees, honeybees, and syrphid flies are among the pollinators of *Claytonia* spp.

Uses

Small tubers of *C. virginica* are called Fairy Spuds, each about the size of a



C. virginica corm; © John D. Byrd, Mississippi State University, Bug-wood.org

garbanzo bean. They are edible and when cooked have a texture similar to a baked potato and have a chestnut-like flavor. They can be cleaned and cooked or eaten raw in salads along with the leaves and stems. The raw tubers have a radish-like spiciness and crunch. Older plants can produce larger tubers, but still small. They are full of vitamins A and C.

The tubers, leaves and stems were consumed by a number of Native American tribes across the country and are still collected by wild foods enthusiasts. They were also dried or formed into cakes for winter storage.

Because they are small, it takes time to gather enough to prepare a meal, which can quickly decimate a population.

Medicinal uses for *Claytonia* species include for analgesic, anti-rheumatic, appetite restorer; eye, dermatologic and urinary complaints; and as a throat tonic and a general tonic.

Propagation

Plant the tubers 3” deep and space 3” apart in fall. Naturalizes easily in favorable conditions. Can also be grown from seed, which for *C. virginica* and some others requires periods of both warm and cold stratification.

Plant Sources

Gardens of the Blue Ridge
<https://gardensoftheblueridge.com>

Prairie Moon Nursery, Winona MN
<http://prairiemoon.com>

References

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Claytonia megarhiza, Alpine springbeauty. Grows across most of our western states. © Walter Siegmund, iNaturalist. CC-BY-SA.

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