

The Herb Society of America's

Notable Native™ Herb 2021

Sanguinaria canadensis, Bloodroot



Sanguinaria canadensis, bloodroot
©Katherine Schlosser, Mar. 9, 2020.

Family: *Papaveraceae* (Poppy family)

Latin Name: *Sanguinaria canadensis* L.

Common Names: bloodroot, red puccoon, redroot

Growth: Herbaceous perennial; ephemeral; colonizing

Hardiness: Grows from Canada to northern Florida; from the East Coast to the Dakotas to Texas.

Light: Shade to Part shade

Soil: Moist rich soil, though can tolerate drier soils

Water: Moderate rainfall

Uses: Historic medicinal; red dye

CONSERVATION STATUS: though abundant, they are rated **AT RISK** due to threats from over collection. (United Plant Savers)

History

Bloodroot is a herbaceous perennial flowering woodland plant and beloved North American spring ephemeral. The genus *Sanguinaria* is from the Latin word blood, *sanguish*. The species name *canadensis* means 'of Canada', where the first documented specimen was observed growing. *Sanguinaria* is a monotypic genus; bloodroot is the only species in it. It is one of about 60 - 65 species in the Poppy family (*Papaveraceae*) in North America. Both the scientific and common names of this plant refer to the orange-red sap contained in the plant's thick underground stems or rhizomes.

A historic favorite spring flower of poets, botanists, educators and nature lovers alike!

Description

A single hairy stem emerges in early Spring cloaked by a single leaf wrapped around the stem. Growing from an orange-red rhizome, the plant reaches from four to ten inches tall. A pure white flower with 7—16 petals surrounding a green oval pistil and numerous stamens with prominent yellow anthers, grows to as much as three inches across. The palmately

lobed leaves and the petals vary considerably in size and shape, some flowers appearing double-flowering. The leaves can reach up to six inches in length with five to nine lobes and persist to mid-summer. A single seed pod remains after the petals have dropped. Seed must be collected soon after ripening, as they should be planted while still fresh. Seed that drops soon creates colonies of plants that are a beautiful groundcover in spring with leaves remaining through much of the summer.

Culture & Habitat

Bloodroot is most often found in humus-rich, moderately moist deciduous forests, blooming before the trees leaf out. Well-drained uplands are more likely spots than low-lying areas that may be too wet.

A light layer of chopped deciduous leaves over the winter helps maintain the nutrients and pH needed (around 6.8 or slightly acidic).

Pollinators

Spring pollinators are primarily early native mining bees (*Adrena* species) but can include honeybees, bumblebees, and small carpenter bees. Bees are

challenged by the short lived flowers, cool temperatures, rain and wind which can all interfere with pollination. If not pollinated by the third day, the anthers bend toward the pistil and self-pollinate. Ants function as the primary means of seed distribution beyond the seed that drops naturally. Ants carry the seed to their nests, feeding on the rich eliasomes



Seed pod forming.

Paul Henjum

Public domain



Flowering stem emerging with leaf wrapped around it. Julie Makin. LBJWC www.wildflower.org

Natural propagation and seed dispersal occur as hungry ants carry off the seed, eating the elaisome, the amino-acid filled appendage attached along the edge of each seed. Ideally, the ants bring the seeds to their nests, and after eating the elaisome, deposit the remaining seed elsewhere within the nest, providing the rich, moist soil that is high in organic matter necessary for its germination and growth.

The rise of non-native ants, such as fire ants, is an additional threat to this wildflower's survival.

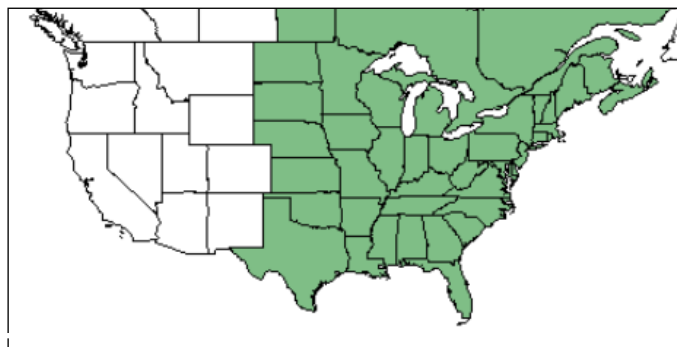
Collect seeds from bloodroot and plant them while fresh. Do not allow them to dry out. The seed is usually ready about 4 weeks after blooming when the pods split open and spill out their seeds which will germinate the following spring.

Bloodroot can also be propagated by digging and dividing sections of the rhizome. The rhizomes should be cut into vertical sections, two inches in length, making sure at least one bud is attached. Plant the rhizome divisions deep enough to cover the top with one to two inches of soil. Plant six inches apart, making sure that the bud is pointing upward.

Wear gloves and wash your hands carefully after working with the rhizome, which contains toxic compounds that may be absorbed through your skin.

References

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Sanguinaria canadensis distribution (shaded in green = native in these areas. Map from USDA Plants Database.

attached to the end of each seed. The flowers offer no nectar.

Uses

The principle use of *Sanguinaria canadensis* has been as a dye. Native American tribes used the red pigment in the roots to color baskets, clothing, tools and weapons. When mixed with animal fat bloodroot produced a paint for the face and body. Native Americans also used the plant to treat a wide variety of conditions. For example, it was used as an abortive, an emetic, an antiemetic, an antihemorrhagic, an escharotic to treat skin lesions, a cough medicine, a laxative, an insect repellent, a cold remedy and a stimulant. In one tribe the root was even rubbed on the palm of an unmarried man to inspire his love. More recently, products containing the plant have been sold as treatments for lesions of the skin or as an ingredient in toothpastes and mouth washes. However, the alkaloid sanguinarine contained in the plant material is a toxin that can cause severe side effects and even death. Any such compounds should be used only under the supervision of a doctor.

Propagation

Bloodroot is one of many myrmecophilous plants, those which have a strong relationship with ants.

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