

The Mayapple - A Spring Treasure

Podophyllum peltatum

By Naturalist, Joy L. Howell

The name gives it away! Yes, the Mayapple can be discovered in the month of May. You'll be missing the action though if you wait until then. The early stages are what I enjoy the most of many of the spring gems.

Early April it's "thumbs up" because the single stem is protruding through the forest floor of leaves and it is just the size of your thumb. A closer look will reveal one or two undeveloped leaves wrapped tightly around the stem. The mature leaves are lobed and coarsely toothed in an umbrella shape, thus leading to the nickname, "The Umbrella Plant". You know, this is the place where the gnomes of the woodland seek shelter during the cool spring rains! The leaf may also resemble the shape of a bird's webbed foot. In mid May, if this plant contains two leaf stalks with one leaf on each, it will have the strength and maturity to produce a two inch wide white flower. This is where the plant breaks the family rules by having two times the number of stamens as petals. Most in the Barberry family have an equal number of each. Another difference can be found on the anthers. The Mayapple's open on the side whereas most in this family open on top. If the leaves are allowed to remain into early summer, a solitary lemon shaped fruit is produced. The fruit is considered ripe when it turns yellow, is slightly tender to the touch like a kiwi, and it has a lemony fragrance. The fruit of this "Raccoon Berry" is a forest delight for a variety of wildlife including ground dwelling birds, squirrels, opossums, raccoons and chipmunks.

The question comes to mind, is this wild edible for humans? Most cookbooks do not include this woodland plant, and if they do, it appears with much caution. Here's why: The green unripe fruit is a powerful cathartic. The rhizome is very toxic and may cause nausea, vomiting and inflammation of the stomach and intestine. Just handling the rhizome may create skin lesions. The leaves and seeds are toxic if ingested as well. The only remaining part is the fruit which, with careful harvesting and preparation, can be eaten raw or made into a delicious cool drink or jam. I've taken the risk and tried the mild strawberry tasting fruit but I did use caution and verified that at least one of my hiking companions was carrying a cell phone just in case there was an emergency!

I must mention that one of the negative characteristics of the Mayapple or "Mandrake" has been useful for medical research. One property is its ability to prevent cells from growing and for this attribute; parts of this plant have been used as a treatment for a variety of cancers. In something bad there is always something good if we search hard enough.

Just when you've had enough of the harsh winter, the muddy spring and your garden just isn't blooming yet, take a leisurely stroll in the forest. The woodland wild flowers will never let you down. Thumbs up to you as you explore and take the time to discover the growth stages of the Mayapple. Step carefully to protect the gnomes and the animal critters hiding under the umbrellas!

Oops, I almost forgot, it is believed that "the girl that picks this flower is soon to be pregnant!"