

# Wildflower in Focus

Text by Melanie Choukas-Bradley  
Artwork by Tina Thieme Brown

## Bloodroot

*Sanguinaria canadensis* L.

Poppy Family (*Papaveraceae*)



One of Maryland's most beautiful wildflowers, bloodroot is among our earliest blooming spring ephemerals. The plant gets its name from the orange-red juice exuded by the root, juice which has been used as everything from a wart remedy to a love charm!

**Flowers:** White flowers, each with 8 or more thinnish petals. One bloom per stem; at first cup-shaped but later opening flat or nearly so, 1 - 2" wide. Flowers spring as if by magic from winter woodland carpets of fallen leaves.

**Leaves:** A large single basal leaf, 3-8" across, often partially wrapped around the flower stalk. The leaf is circular in outline, but it is deeply lobed and bluntly toothed.

**Height and Growth Habit:** 3 - 12"; upright or slightly leaning.

**Habitat and Range:** Rich woods; Eastern Canada south to Florida and Oklahoma.

**Herbal Lore:** Although toxic, the root enjoyed wide-spread use among American Indians for a variety of illnesses, including asthma, bronchitis, and rheumatism. The root juice was popular as a dye, and Steven Foster and James A. Duke report in **Peterson Field Guides' Field Guide to Medicinal Plants: Eastern and Central North America:** "A bachelor of the Ponca tribe would rub a piece of the root as a love charm on the palm of his hand, then scheme to shake hands with the woman he desired to marry. After shaking hands, the girl would be found willing to marry him in 5 - 6 days." Foster and Duke note that in the modern world "the alkaloid sanguinarine" found in bloodroot "has shown antiseptic, anesthetic, and anticancer activity. It is used commercially as a plaque-inhibiting agent in toothpaste, mouthwashes, and rinses." However, their book contains the warning: "Do not ingest. Jim Duke has experienced tunnel vision from nibbling the root." Please do not attempt to examine the root of this or any other native wildflower. Help preserve this increasingly scarce woodland plant.

**Similar Species:** Could be confused with other early spring wildflowers. The uncommon twinleaf (*Jeffersonia diphylla*) has basal leaves deeply cleft or divided into two large segments. Rue anemone (*Anemella thalictroides*) has smaller flowers, often more than one per stem, and stem leaves. The hepaticas (*Hepatica* spp.) have smaller flowers and distinctly three-lobed basal leaves.

**Blooming Time:** March - May.

**Locations:** Throughout Maryland but not common on the Coastal Plain. Adkins Arboretum, Tuckahoe State Park, Piscataway Park, Rocks State Park, Patapsco Valley State Park, Gunpowder Falls State Park, Potomac and Patuxent Rivers, Rock Creek Park, Seneca Creek State Park, Little Bennett Regional Park, Sugarloaf Mountain, Catoctin Mountain, western mountains. Consult **Finding Wildflowers in the Washington-Baltimore Area** by Fleming, Lobstein and Tufty for additional bloodroot locations.

MNPS board president Cris Fleming and Leslie Hunter-Cario, chair of the Eastern Shore chapter,

contributed to this article. Wildflower in Focus  
text adapted from **An Illustrated Guide to  
Eastern Woodland Wildflowers and Trees: 350  
Plants Observed at Sugarloaf Mountain,  
Maryland** (Choukas-Bradley and Brown,  
University of Virginia Press).