

Trillium

Trillium: An Amazing Native

by Lyn Chimera

The sight of trillium blooming in the woods is a real sign of spring. It is such a beautiful flower that it is often used on the cover of books or in articles about native plants and wildflowers. Trillium is the official flower of the province of Ontario and the state flower of Ohio.

I was recently given a very rare green trillium and decided to do some research on the plant. What a surprise I had discovering interesting facts about trillium in general and the green trillium in particular.

Trillium is both the common and botanical name. The name Trillium comes from “tri” meaning three. Its parts are arranged in threes or multiples of 3 – 3 leaves, 3 sepals, 3 petals, 6 stamens, 3 stigmas. Even the ovary has 3 compartments. For this reason, sometimes it is referred to as the Trinity Flower.

Trilliums are native to temperate forests in North America and parts of Asia. The genus Trillium has 49 species, 39 of them in the US. This herbaceous perennial grows from rhizomes in deciduous forests. It blooms in May while the tree leaves are opening, but needs the early spring sunlight before the trees leaf out to do well. Their leaves grow parallel to the ground so they can absorb as much sunlight as possible. An interesting thing about the rhizome is that it has “rings” at the end so you can actually count them to see how old a trillium is. Some can live 25 to 60 years!



Perhaps trilliums live so long because it takes them a long time to reach maturity. A trillium seed can take two years just to mature enough to break through the soil with a single leaf and up to 7 years to flower. This is one reason that trillium are so expensive to buy and also why digging them from the wild to sell is still continuing, though illegal. Always ask where the trillium was propagated before buying. I was at a presentation where the person said the packaged ones you see in big box stores for \$7 are all likely illegally dug. A nursery simply can't afford to spend 7 years tending seedlings and sell them for such a little amount.

Trillium are declining at an alarming rate. When I was a child the woods were full of them. We had a place in the country and always picked a bouquet for Mother's Day. Now it's difficult to find many at all. One reason is that if the flower and leaves are picked, or munched by deer, chances are the rhizome will die. They are a favorite of deer and that in combination with illegal harvesting has decimated the populations.

Some of the most common trillium in our area are: *Trillium grandiflorum* (the classic white), *Trillium erectum* (red) and *Trillium luteum* (yellow). The white trillium turns pink as it fades. Many people think it's a different

variety but it's not. The rare green trillium is caused by a mycoplasma (microorganism infecting the plant) that causes the white trillium to convert all its reproductive parts to green petals. This plant doesn't produce seeds but can reproduce by rhizomes.

To learn more: **Spring Wildflowers of the Northeast**, A Natural History by Carol Gracie.



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