BLOODROOT

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

IN general, plants which are able to store up food below the surface during the winter in the form of bulbs, corms, or underground rootstocks are capable of flowering far earlier the following spring, drawing on these reserves, than those which must depend for their nourishment on the efforts of the current season. This is why so many of our first spring bloomers use such systems. One of these flowers is the delicate and attractive member of the poppy family (Papaveraceae) called bloodroot, *Sanguinaria canadensis,* which can be found flowering in our Virginia woods in late March, through April and sometimes into May.

Bloodroot grows from a thick, horizontal, underground rootstock which sends up several leaves and flower buds at regular intervals near its apex. Each leaf is wrapped around a pointed bud as it is pushed up through the ground, then the flower stalk shoots up several inches above the immature leaf and the bud opens into a beautiful, solitary, white or pinkish flower about 1½ inches across. There are 8-12 petals and 2 sepals, the latter falling off as the flower opens. Only the pistil is mature when the flower first blooms, so that insects which land on a young flower will not brush off pollen but may leave some pollen from older flowers previously visited, thus aiding cross-fertilization. There are about 20 stamens which mature later and are bright yellow and slightly pyramid-shaped. The petals are long and narrow, tapering at both ends. They are very delicate, remain closed at night and on dull days, and drop off the plant after only a few days. If the flower is picked and brought into the house, they drop off after only a few minutes while you are looking around for a suitable vase! As soon as the flower is over, the leaves unfold. They are bluish-green, rounded and deeply palmately cleft into 5-9 lobes, and are slightly glaucous underneath, that is, covered with a whitish bloom. The leaves eventually may grow about a foot high, shadowing the long, thin, pointed seed pods.

The thick perennial root contains a deep orange-red sap which gives the plant its common name, bloodroot. Another name for it is 'red puccoon.' The root sap is acrid and rather poisonous although it has been used medicinally in limited amounts. Old country people tell of squeezing out a few drops onto a spoonful of sugar and administering it to members of their family with bronchial complaints. A vinegar made from the rootstock used to be applied topically to ringworm, and used as a gargle for sore throats. However, I do not think experimenting with its use internally is to be advised, and in view of its unpleasant taste this is probably unlikely. The red juice has been used extensively as a dye. Indian warriors painted their face and arms with it, and the squaws used it for coloring their skins and baskets.

Sanguinaria canadensis is found throughout the eastern U.S., although it is commoner in the South, and tends to prefer the rich, open woods of the mountains and piedmont. My friends the Pitts, who have a beautiful wildflower garden in Charlottesville, tell me that bloodroot is easy to transplant. They dig it up with plenty of its surrounding earth and incorporate it into the open woodland situation where it will receive mottled sunlight. It grows and flowers well, will increase over the years, and sometimes has been known to produce 'double' flowers.

I think we should be thankful for plants such as *Sanguinaria* which do store up much of their nourishment in advance. Without them, we would have to wait a good deal longer to find something blooming in the spring.