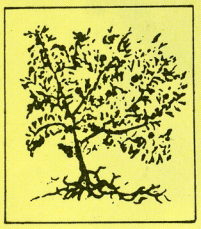
In Nature's Garden



The Wild Geranium

BY ELIZABETH MURRAY

Illustrated by Lucile Walton

We are very lucky here in our wild member of the geranium or cranesbill family, Geraniaceae. The many cultivated members (mostly belonging to the genus *Pelargonium*) of the family are not nearly so attractive as the little *Geranium maculatum*, the wild or spotted geranium which flowers in woods, thickets and meadows in the Virginia mountains and Piedmont in April, May and June.

The Geraniaceae is a family of dicotyledona, in our area all herbaceous, with perfect, usually regular flowers and flower parts arranged in fives. The ovary of each flower is deeply lobed with one seed in each ovule. Styles are elongated resembling the bill of a bird, hence the common alternate name, cranesbill. The word geranium comes from the greek word *geranos* meaning *crane*. When the fruit is ripe, the seeds are shot out from the parent plant by a spring mechanism which carries them much further afield than if they had merely dropped out. This is, of course, a very efficient dispersal mechanism.

Our wild cranesbill or geranium, *Geranium maculatum*, grows from a thick rhizome into a plant up to two feet high. The leaves are divided into five lobes, each lobe further dissected at the edges. Flowers are normally rose pink or pale purple, although there is a rare white variety, *forma albiflorum*. The flowers have both male (anthers) and female (stigmas) parts, but the anthers ripen and actually drop off before the stigmas mature, a good insurance against self-fertilization. The flowers are pollinated by insects, bees and the common sulphur butterflies, which are interested in the nectar at the base of the flower. Minute hairs in the base of the corolla possibly protect this nectar from rain and mechanical disturbance.

The mechanism by which the seeds are shot out from the plant is fascinating. Initially, the styles are all joined together at the top of the ovary. They dry as they develop until suddenly they split apart and coil up like a spring, the force of the coiling sending the seeds shooting out. Studies on a closely related European species showed seeds travelling up to five feet away from the parent plant. If you look at a flower which has matured, you can see the little dried up styles, still attached at their tips, and coiled up from the base.

Although there are several closely related species which now grow wild here, they have been mostly introduced from Europe and Asia and, subsequently, naturalized. *Geranium maculatum* is our only truly native geranium. It has a wide distribution in the eastern United States, growing from Maine down to Georgia, and west to Manitoba, Missouri and Kansas.

By the time the wild geranium is fully out in Virginia, we shall be at the height of our spring, and travelling headlong into summer.