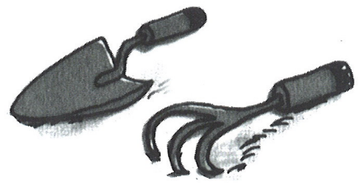
Help preserve habitat for native flowers and plants



1. **Never dig up or pick** a wildflower or plant—enjoy it in its natural habitat.
2. When walking in the woods, **stay on the path** so that you don't trample plants.
3. **Write your local politician**, or member of the provincial government, telling her or him that woodlands need to be protected along with the native plants and wildlife that grow in them. To find out who your MPP is, call Elections Ontario at 416 326-6300 or 1 800 668-2727. For local politicians, check the blue pages of your phone book.
4. **Volunteer to help organizations** such as the Federation of Ontario Naturalists that work to preserve habitats.
5. Encourage your parents to **replace non-native and invasive plants with native ones.**
6. **Start a schoolground naturalization project** at your school using native plants to attract wildlife and create natural habitats.

Why you should plant native seeds/plants in your garden

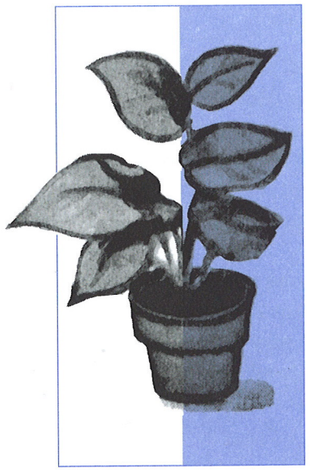
A native plant is adapted to the climate, soil, pests, and weather of the local area. During the hot, dry days of summer, you will not have to water these plants as much as non-native species.

Native plants provide food and shelter for many insects, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Non-native plants may not benefit local wildlife as much.

For general information on plants in Ontario and where to purchase native seeds and plants, contact the North American Native Plant Society at 416 680-6280, or nativeplantsoc@yahoo.ca or the Society for Ecological Restoration at 905 641-2252, ext. 6494, or serontario@niagarac.on.ca

To find out about woodlands in your area, contact the FON, your local naturalist club or the Conservation Authority in your area (contact information is available from the FON).

TRY THIS light experiment



- Purchase two small indoor plants (ivy works well) from a nursery or garden centre. Choose healthy plants that are not only the same kind but also about the same size.
- Take care of the plants in the same way: water them on the same days; if you fertilize one, fertilize the other.
- The only difference is that one of the plants should be placed in the sunny spot and the other in a dark closet.
- What differences do you see in the plants after three days? After one week? After two weeks? After one month?
- What happened to the plant that was placed in the dark? Why?

Want to learn more about plants?
These books are available from the FON:
Introducing Trees; Introducing Flowers; Ferns; Fungus and More; The Jumbo Book of Nature Science; Wetlands; Habitats.

Or visit us on the web at www.ontarionature.org

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Woodland Wildflowers of Southern Ontario

The Splendour of Spring

The "cheer-up, cheer-up" of the first robin of spring is one of the sweetest sounds after a long, cold winter. You can't help but smile knowing the dull, dark days of winter are nearly over, and an explosion of colour is about to occur as spring wildflowers burst through the newly thawed ground. In wooded areas, the first flowers of spring are often found on sun-warmed, south-facing slopes. Here solar rays warm the ground, removing the last traces of old man winter.

Adaptations to shade

For many woodland plants, spring is a race against time. There are only a few short weeks in which they can grow and reproduce before the forest floor is shaded by the newly emerging leaves of the deciduous trees. In Ontario, many of the spring bloomers push out of the ground as early as March and are all but invisible by late summer.

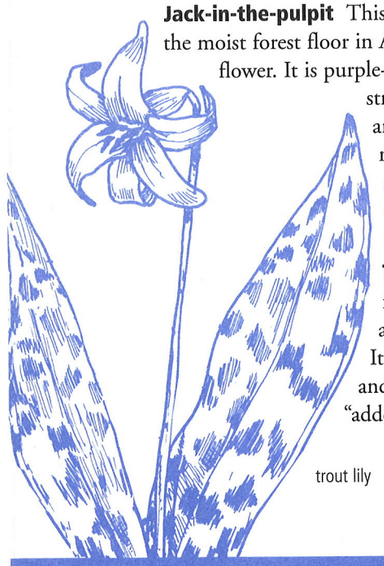
Woodland wildflowers have a short growing season — before leaves appear on the trees — to help take advantage of the brief time when sunlight is available to them. Many of these beautiful native wildflowers are short-lived (ephemeral). As soon as the days get longer, and the sun's rays become stronger, the tiny, curled leaf buds on the trees will burst open in a fountain of green, shading the forest floor below.

Fortunately, the spring ephemerals are able to grow, flower, be pollinated and reproduce (make more seeds) in a very short time (sometimes only a few weeks).

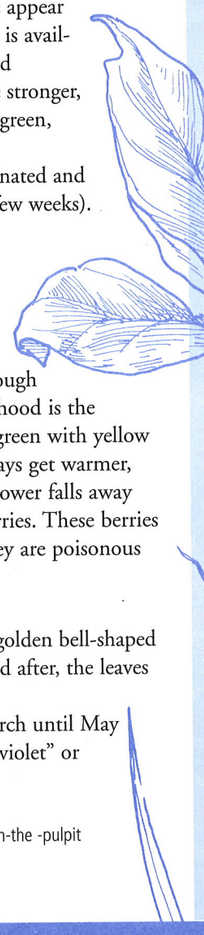
Some common woodland flowers that are well adapted to blooming in the spring are trilliums, Jack-in-the-pulpit, trout lilies, mayapples, hepatica and wild ginger.

Jack-in-the-pulpit This small woodland plant peeks through the moist forest floor in April or early May. Its cobra-like hood is the flower. It is purple-brown on the inside and bright green with yellow stripes on the outside. When the days get warmer, and spring turns to summer, the flower falls away revealing a small clump of red berries. These berries may look sweet and juicy, but they are poisonous to people.

Trout lily This spring plant has golden bell-shaped flowers. Just like the fish it's named after, the leaves are covered with maroon speckles. It blooms in moist woods from March until May and is also known as the "dog-tooth violet" or "adder's tongue."



trout lily



Jack-in-the -pulpit

Trillium

The white trillium is the official plant of Ontario. The name trillium comes from the Latin word for three (tri = three, think of tricycle). This plant has three leaves, three sepals and three petals. It can be found blanketing the woodlands of southern Ontario in April and early May.

Have you ever heard that if you pick a trillium it will take seven years to grow again? This is true, to an extent. It takes seven years for the plant to develop from a seed into a flower. If you pick this flower you are picking the sepals and leaves, which are the food-producing parts of the plant. Therefore, it's best to admire this beautiful wildflower in its natural habitat.

The red trillium is slightly smaller than its white counterpart. It is sometimes called "wake robin" because it appears early in the spring around the same time that cheerful robins return.

The trillium was designated as our provincial floral emblem because, at one time, it was readily seen throughout the Ontario landscape. Due to the fragmentation of woodlots and the destruction of many forests, people now know mainly of this majestic flower from pictures in books.

Mayapple

As its name suggests, this plant blooms in the early spring. Its snowy white flowers are about five centimetres across and sheltered under the umbrella-like leaves. Look for colonies of mayapple plants in spring, covering the woodland floor like small green umbrellas.

Wild ginger

Large, heart-shaped, woolly leaves conceal the maroon flower of wild ginger. The colour and rank smell of the flower attract carrion-eating beetles (beetles that feed on dead animals). The insects are able to walk right into the ground-hugging blooms and pollinate them.

Sharp-lobed hepatica

One of the earliest flowering plants, hepatica is a member of the buttercup family. It is also called liverleaf because its leaves resemble the three lobes of the liver. From March to April, the blue, pink or white flowers can be seen poking up from the brown leaf litter of the woodland floor.

Although some of these plants are edible, never eat anything you find out in the wild unless you are with a knowledgeable adult. Some plants may look edible but could make you very sick. Certain parts of plants are edible while other parts of the same plant are poisonous (for example, the tender stalks of rhubarb can make a wonderful pie but the leaves are poisonous). Better yet, don't pick wild plants, just admire them.

Develop your budding artist skills!

Bring a pad of paper and several pencils. Choose a flower, and note the general shape of the flower first and sketch the outline. Next look for specific details. Are the leaves jagged or smooth? Can you see the stamen or pistil, or are they hidden from view? Look carefully at the shape and colour of the petals. Once you have finished looking, be sure to put the rotting leaves back over the new growth or a frost could kill the delicate plant. Are there other parts of the forest that you could sketch to help you remember your visit to the woodland?

Check out the splendour of a spring woodland!

Visit a local woodland in a conservation area or park. Be sure to stay on clearly marked trails – you don't want to get lost or trample any plants underfoot.

Look for signs of spring. Are any birds collecting twigs and grasses to make their nests? Listen carefully and you may hear the sharp trill of the spring peeper. This tiny amphibian, as small as your fingernail, can make the loudest noise in the forest!

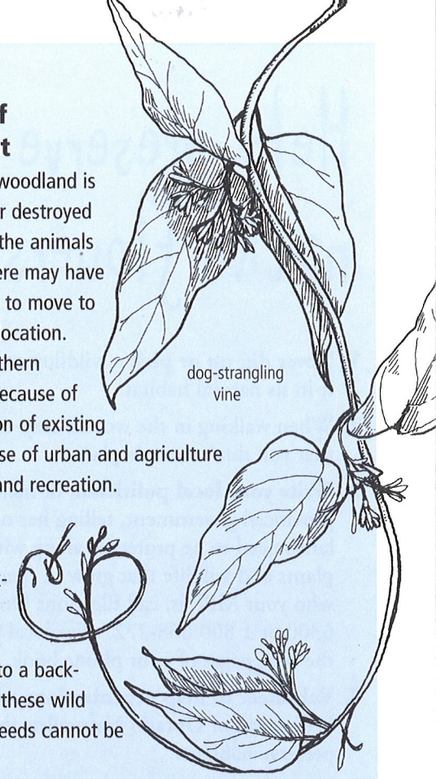
Now, check the moist, forest floor. There may still be leaves that have not decomposed from last fall. Carefully move some of the leaves aside, and you may see spring ephemeral plants just starting to peek through the ground. Examine the tiny leaves and stems. Can you identify the plant?

Plants in Danger

Loss of habitat

When a woodland is altered or destroyed some of the animals living there may have a chance to move to another location.

A plant, however, is unable to move. In southern Ontario, plants are becoming endangered because of the loss of woodlands and the fragmentation of existing woods. Woodlands are being divided because of urban and agriculture development, resource extraction, forestry and recreation.



Picking and invasive plants

Plants also become endangered due to picking and the invasion of non-native species. Pretty wildflowers such as orchids and trilliums are often dug up and transplanted into a backyard garden. Even if carefully transplanted, these wild plants often die because their specialized needs cannot be met in a backyard.

Plants and other creatures in a natural ecosystem have a balanced relationship where each plays an important role. Sometimes non-native plants are introduced through the intentional planting of "garden species" but often the seeds or plants are unintentionally spread to other areas. Mud on your boots may contain tiny seeds that can then be transferred to other habitats. Animals and birds are also responsible for transferring seeds across long distances. Sometimes these plants are harmless and stay where they germinate; other times they are invasive and spread out of control.

If a plant that is not normally found in an area moves in, it may out-compete the native plants for water, sunlight or minerals. It is this fierce competition with other plants that makes invasive plants a problem. Non-native species usually do not provide food or shelter to insects, birds or animals the way that a native plant does.

Dog-strangling vine... the guest that won't leave!

One example of a very invasive exotic species in southern Ontario that was intentionally introduced and, like an uninvited guest, refuses to leave, is the dog-strangling vine. Also known as black swallowwort, this vine was introduced in farmland. Since then the creeping vines, leaves, and green seed pods have clambered over other plants, entangling and "suffocating" them by taking much-needed nutrients, water and sunlight.

Forest loss, fragmentation, and the invasion of non-native plants all threaten the survival of wildflowers across southern Ontario. In fact, over 80 percent of southern Ontario woodlands have been lost since the 1800s. With more and more development threatening southern Ontario woodlands, we need to save the remaining woodlands so that people in the future can enjoy them as much as we do.