

Deptford Pink

by Sally Cureton

One of our most common, brightly colored wildflowers is in fact not a native plant, but an immigrant from England. The Deptford Pink (*Dianthus armeria*) plant was by all accounts named during Tudor times for the fields where it grew abundantly near Deptford UK. It is a small, but amazingly intensely colored pink flower with grass-like leaves. Although on the increase in Europe and North America, its numbers are seriously declining in the UK where it is listed as endangered. The flowers of Deptford Pink grow in small clusters at the end of a thin stiff stem about 6- 15 inches tall. Each flower is about ½ inch across with 5 petals.

Deptford Pink is found everywhere in the Central Appalachian Mountains. We have it here in Massanutten along side many of our roads each summer as it blooms from June thru September - a long blooming season. It usually grows in full sunlight and does quite well in a clay or gravelly soil. It can also be found in pastures, abandoned fields and any irregularly mowed grassy areas. A plant with a unique appearance, Deptford Pink has the look of spring.

Another absolutely lovely plant found this time of the year throughout the woodlands is the Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*.) This is a native perennial that will grow to be about to 1½ feet tall. It consists of a loose cluster of leaves with a flowering stem bearing 1-5 lavender blooms. Each flower consists of five petals and measures about 1-1½ inches across. The Wild Geranium plant is bisexual; each flower goes from being male to being female. Individual blossoms will last for 1-3 days with the female organs becoming ready to be fertilized just as the male ones are fading away. So, it cannot be self-fertilizing.

All parts of the Wild Geranium contain tannin. As a result, it has a history of being used as a medicinal herb, especially for the relief of sore throat, influenza, swollen feet, stomach problems. For almost 100 years it was actually listed in the United States Pharmacopoeia. In the Old World this plant was known as Cranesbill because of the appearance of the seed pod. It looked to many people like a bird's head with a long beak. As a result, the word Geranium comes from the Greek word Geranas, meaning "crane." When the seed pod bursts, seeds can be flung as far as 30 feet. Chipmunks will eat these seeds and deer will browse on the foliage a bit.

Wild Geraniums grow in woods and meadows blooming from April through June. The Rockingham Springs Arboretum has a great many of these plants in the wooded area to the right of the spring house. They prefer light shade to partial sunlight, so our environment is perfect for them. Because they also tolerate full sunlight, these plants are one of the easiest to grow in our mountain environment.

