

Plants in the Arboretum: May-Apple and Wild Geranium

by Sally Cureton

One of the more interesting and fairly abundant plants in the Rockingham Springs Arboretum this time of year is the **may-apple** *Podophyllum peltatum*. A common plant in this area, it is a member of the Barberry family. These plants are native to the eastern US and frequently found in low damp woods and moist meadows. The name refers to the May blooming of its flower, which resembles an apple blossom.

Each may-apple plant produces two large (6-12 inches wide) deeply notched umbrella-like leaves. In the fork of these leaves a single nodding flower is produced. It is only about 1-2 inches wide, waxy, with 6 to 9 petals. Queen bees frequently visit it since it is a very rich source of pollen. Each flower gives rise to a yellow fruit the size of a large grape. They ripen just as the leaves begin to wither and die in September.

This ripe fruit is edible by humans and will sometimes be eaten by box turtles. Unripe fruit and the rest of the plant are poisonous if eaten. The roots contain pedophiles, a powerful drug that has been used to treat kidney and liver ailments. It can cause death if taken in large amounts. The may-apple root was used extensively by Indians and early settlers for medicinal purposes.

Another favorite plant found in abundance in the Arboretum is the **wild geranium** *Geranium maculatum*. Its lovely lavender flowers grow in loose clusters of 2-5. Each flower is 1 to 1½ inches wide, with 5 petals. The leaves are 4-5 inches wide, a grey-green in color and cut with deeply tooth lobes, about 1-2 feet tall. Wild Geranium grows in woods, thickets and meadows from Maine to Georgia and west to Missouri. It blooms from April to June. It has an amazingly long blooming season. Both of these plants, may-apple and wild geranium, can be found along the trails to the west (right) of the spring house in the Arboretum.