

Trilliums - Many Varieties Here

by Sally Cureton

Trilliums are a favorite spring flower for many people. We are fortunate to live in an area where there are several varieties in abundance - including those in the Rockingham Springs Arboretum. Trilliums are perennials consisting of a stem bearing single whorl of three leaves, a flower with three petals, 3 sepals and 6 stamens. They are a member of the Lily family and bloom between April and June. In color Trilliums range from stark white to dark purple depending on the variety. These plants take a very long time to mature from seed to blossom. Amazingly there is a minimum of six years from the dropping of the seed to the emergence of the first flower for the plant. The first year after the seed falls to the forest floor it germinates. The second year it sends out a shoot. Then over the next four years it develops leaves until finally a flower appears.

Among the varieties common in this area are Nodding Trillium, Large-flowered Trillium, Painted Trillium, Purple Trillium and Yellow Trillium. Nodding Trillium (*Trillium cernuum*) has a short curved stock with a nodding white flower. The flower itself is about 1½ inches across and the plant is 6-24 inches tall. The species name is from the Latin for nodding or drooping, *cernuus*. The flower actually 'nods' to a level below the leaves. It has a somewhat unpleasant odor and in some areas is known as 'Stinking Willie.'

Another white Trillium is the Large-flowered Trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*.) Although it can turn pink as it ages, it begins waxy-white with purple streaks. The flower itself will be 2-4 inches across and the plant 8-18 inches tall. This plant often grows in spectacular colonies and is frequently found in wildflower gardens. The roots were used by Native Americans for various medicinal purposes and the leaves were used as cooking greens. Of course, these practices no longer exist since taking either the roots or the leaves of a Trillium plant will cause it to die off.

One of the most beautiful examples of this flower is the Painted Trillium (*Trillium undulatum*.) Also white, but with a splash of pink in its center, the flower itself is about 2 to 2½ inches across with a wavy margin, on a stalk of 8-20 inches. Its unique coloring makes this particular Trillium easy to recognize and a favorite. Purple Trillium (*Trillium erectum*) is another wide-spread variety. Its leaves are mottled and the dark purple flower is rather foul-smelling, giving it the nickname of 'Stinking Benjamin.' About the same size as the Painted Trillium it has a flower that droops in a manner similar to the Nodding Trillium. The Yellow Trillium (*Trillium luteum*) has a pure yellow flower with a lovely lemon scent. A common variety, it is often used for ornamental purposes. Several of these varieties are to be found in the Rockingham Springs Arboretum. If you head to the right of the Spring House, they can be found alongside the trails, waiting to be admired.