

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



March 14, 2018

No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn. Hal Borland

Take heart, Pocahontas, as we look forward to warmer breezes in our hair, warmer sunshine on our faces, warmer earth beneath our feet. It is the time of the Full Worm Moon, that welcomed time of the year when the ground softens and earthworm casts reappear, inviting the return of the robins. We spotted the first robins of 2018 on March 2. Soon the robins, like us, were hailed by yet another round of rain, snow, and wind.

One of the first signs of spring in area woodlands is Hepatica, an early spring wildflower in the buttercup family, and this week's encounter with nature. Also known as liverleaf, mouse ear, or squirrel cup, Hepatica derives its name from the Latin *epatikos*, which means affecting the liver. During the Middle Ages, many people believed in the Doctrine of Signature. Simply stated, if a plant looked like a human organ, surely that plant would be useful in treating disorders of that organ. And while its purplish color and three-lobed leaves do resemble human livers, hepatica does nothing for liver ailments. In fact, hepatica is poisonous in large doses and mildly astringent in smaller doses.

Two species of Hepatica are found in North America – sharp-lobed plants which prefer alkaline soils and round-lobed plants which prefer acidic soils. Both are found throughout Iowa growing in the leaf litter of wooded uplands, especially maple and beech woodlands. Both are also among the first wildflowers to appear each spring.

Hepatica's bisexual flowers first start appearing in March, often pushing up through the snow. Blowing about on their slender hairy stems, their pink, purple, blue, or white sepals on three green bracts offer an attractive and welcome sight. Many plants use hair or trichomes, the proper botanical term, to provide protection from frost, wind, heat, insects, and grazers. Unlike human hairs, which are protein filaments growing from follicles, trichomes are specialized epidermal cells. However, like human hair, they too may be frail, coarse, long and straight, or short and curly. Hepatica leaves are basal, leathery, and over winter become purplish or liver-colored. Like other early risers, their delicately scented flowers produce no nectar but are an early source of pollen for native bees and flies.

American Indians used hepatica tea to treat convulsions in children. A Meskwaki medicine man describes his use of hepatica as follows: When the mouth gets twisted and the eyes get crossed, this root is brewed into a tea and the face is washed until it returns to normal.

If we're talking spring, it's time to save the date and make plans to attend the Pocahontas Garden Extravaganza April 13 & 14. You won't want to miss a Friday evening preview/wine tasting from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. as well as the main event on Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Hope to see you at the Expo Center – perhaps blowing about on hairy stems among the garden plants!

