

Conservation Corner

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Alas, winter has returned to Pocahontas County, interrupting our unseasonably warm spring weather. But did we need to be reminded twice? On our farm, the robins have resorted to nibbling on frozen highbush cranberries while I've resorted to curling up in the easy chair with a blanket wrapped around me. Did you know some plants use that same strategy to stay warm? Let's take a closer look at one of them this week, Bloodroot.

Bloodroot, *Sanguinaria Canadensis*, a member of the poppy family, may be found growing in colonies in rich moist woodlands across eastern North America. Other common names include corn root, red Indian paint, or simply red root. Appropriately enough, its Latin genus name means "bleeding" as its thick rootstock oozes a bright red juice when cut or broken. Just like blood, it quickly coagulates to stop the bleeding. Indians used the red juice as an insect repellent and as a dye for fabrics, baskets, tools, and warpaint. There's even a Pocahontas connection. Captain John Smith wrote in his diary that the Indian women chosen by Chief Powhatan for their pleasure painted their bodies with bloodroot.



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Be forewarned, however, that the red juice of the bloodroot may be deadly if ingested as it contains alkaloids which are closely related to morphine. Several Indian tribes also used the juice externally on warts, ringworms, and other fungus infections, chronic eczema, and cancerous growths.

Bloodroot is one of the first wildflowers to appear in Iowa woodlands each spring. The first bit to appear is the flower stalk, followed by a light green leaf which emerges from the ground coiled around the stalk. Each stalk bears a single white flower of 8 to 16 petals arranged in an alternating pattern of larger and smaller petals which produces a somewhat square outline. As temperatures dip during the overnight, its large, lobed leaves will hug the stem like insulation while its flowers will close up to protect against the cold. Lasting only a day or two, the flowers produce no nectar but are an early source of pollen for native bees and flies.

Each flower bears a green pod, 1.5 – 2.4 inches in length, which contains 10-15 round, black, and orange-red seeds. The seeds also have white elaiosomes, fleshy structures rich in lipids and proteins that attract ants. The ants carry the seeds to their nest where the elaiosomes are fed to the larvae while the seeds are left to germinate in the rich garbage disposal area of the anthill. This type of seed dispersal is known as myrmecochory. Practiced by at least 11,000 plant species, it is a dramatic example of convergent evolution and mutualistic symbiotic relationships.

Bloodroot along with trillium, hepatica, and snow anemones will soon make their appearance in the woodlands of Pocahontas County. Take time soon to head out to Whitetail Ridge, Sunken Grove, or your favorite wooded area and soak in the sights, sounds, and smells of spring. Perhaps this time it's here to stay.