

## Notable Natives

### *Hepatica* sp.

A small plant with a big presence, this spring blooming woodland perennial has two species that are native locally, *Hepatica acutiloba* and *H. americana*. They are in the buttercup family, and the distinction of “*americana*” indicates that this species was first found on our continent.

Plants in the genus *Hepatica* are not truly springtime “ephemerals,” plants that bloom early and then disappear like Dutchman’s breeches and trillium. *Hepatica*’s leaves remain throughout the growing season and even through the winter, disappearing only when new blooms arrive the following spring. These little lovelies pack a punch blooming from mid-March to June.

Having much in common, both species have three dark-green lobed leaves which are hairy underneath. The leaves are sharp-lobed or heart-shaped in *acutiloba* and rounded in *americana*. Their “flowers” range through white, pink, blue, and lavender. However, they are not actually flowers but six to ten sepals arranged around yellow stamens. The hairy stems keep the plant warm on frosty spring days.

It takes three years for a plant to produce its first blossoms. No new leaves form until the “flowers” fall. Then the leaves persist through winter and are necessary for the plant’s nourishment. Eventually they turn purplish and the edges curl. Fruit forms in early summer. Propagation is by stratified seed or division in autumn.

The main differences between the two *hepatica* species are in size and soil requirements. The locally more common *acutiloba* can be up to twelve inches across and prefers alkaline soil. *Americana* is four to six inches across and prefers acidic soils. However, they both require the semi-rich soil of wooded uplands and partial sun/shade. Because they bloom before trees leaf out in spring, they have sun when they



*Hepatica* photos by Meredith Tucker.

are reproducing followed by shade in summer. ailments. It was used by Native Americans for many ailments: coughs, intestinal trouble, toothache, convulsions. They even smoked the leaves for heart problems. In fact, *hepatica* was one of the main ingredients in tonics of the 1850s.

Much confusion surrounds the naming of *hepatica* species due to reclassifications, one right here in Lake County, Illinois, the only place one can find *H. americana* var. *obtusa*. Don’t get hung up on names, just focus on the two main native species.

Plant these perennial wildflowers in a shady spot under trees in your yard. Don’t hesitate to plant either of the *hepatica* species. They have few pests or diseases and feature long-lasting early blooms. They also provide some year-long ground cover and are especially irresistible in your springtime woodland.

—Virginia Black



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The name “*hepatica*” comes from the early Greeks, who named it for its leaves shaped and colored like liver; they believed it to be good for liver

