



# Have You Seen Signs of Spring Yet?

Story and photos by Chrisha Dolan, Missouri Master Naturalist, Meramec Hills Chapter

Have you seen any signs of spring yet? Maybe not, but the sounds have begun to come alive. Gardeners and horticulturalists look for daffodils and tulips and forsythia but a naturalist experiences spring from a different perspective. Where I live, the spring peepers have already started signing their sweet serenade. They are the tiny little frogs with a high pitched peeping and live in almost any seemingly insignificant fishless water hole known as a vernal pool. As I walk out into my yard, the sound makes me want to do my “spring is here” dance and start my annual search for the botanical signs of spring known as spring ephemerals. Spring ephemerals are the fragile wildflowers that pop up early in spring before the trees and other vegetation leaf out and shade them from the sun. These are often unknown, unseen and underappreciated but for me, they are delightful. And while I feel almost secretive and triumphant to have met them, I think everyone should have the chance to know and love them.

Walking through the woods or along a stream bank and looking closely, you will start to see these unassuming plants but I warn, once you see one, you’ll notice they are everywhere. There are many, but some easily identified are spring beauties, trilliums, trout lilies and hepatica. Spring Beauties (*Claytonia virginica*) can be found blooming in woodlands from February to May and are about 5 inches high. They have delicate light pink flowers with darker pink stripes running the length of each petal. In moist bottomlands, you can also find Trilliums (Wake Robin) with three mottled green leaves and typically an erect red flower, but the flowers can also be green or yellowish.

Personifying these shy flowers are the trout Lilies (*Erythronium americanum*) and white dogtooth violets (*Erythronium*



*albidum*). They are within the same genus, approximately six inches tall and both have nodding flowers occurring from March until May with mottled strap-like leaves. Notable differences are trout lilies have yellow flowers and can be found along streams while dogtooth violets have a white flower and are seen in rich wooded slopes. Hepaticas (*Hepatica sp.*) range a variety of habitats from ravines and rich slopes to mossy banks and ledges. They have an overwintering purple-brown, three-lobed leaf with green leaves emerging after the February to April flowering. Flowers are white and become purple as they mature.

There are a great many signs of spring to be discovered, such as blooming redbuds or catkins of the oaks and don't forget to look close to home as well. Your lawn can be a goldmine of spring wildflowers that some, well most, people call weeds. Look closely, for these are often the smallest flowers to be seen and include field pansy, bluets, henbits, sorrels and speedwell.

Missouri has great opportunities to explore in its conservation and natural areas. There are numerous websites and guides to explore your fascination with plants and the natural world. Some of my favorites are included here: Missouri Department of Conservation (<http://mdc.mo.gov/>), Missouri Botanical Garden (<http://www.mobot.org/>), Missouri Wildflowers (<http://www.missouriwildflowerguide.com/>) and Missouri Plants (<http://www.missouriplants.com/>). Joy and surprise are just waiting to be discovered by the gentle and inquisitive, so grab a hand lens or a camera or nothing at all and take a quiet walk to discover the commencement of spring.

