
Wildflower Spot – May 2007
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

MAY-APPLE

Podophyllum peltatum

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Long grown by southeast gardeners, this perennial has a long history, going back to Linnaeus (Swedish botanist responsible for our two-name system) who named it. Supposedly he saw resemblance between the leaf and a duck's foot and so called it "foot-leaf", *podo* being Greek for "foot" and *phylum* meaning "leaf". Imaginative American children have called them "green umbrellas".

May-apples do well in any good garden soil with added organic matter and filtered sunlight or partial shade. If properly planted in a friendly environment, may-apple is a superb groundcover, rapidly covering problem areas of bare earth, even slopes where erosion is a problem. Over a few seasons the plants will merge. Propagation is by seed and the rootstocks, which can be divided almost any time.

The large, deeply divided leaves are usually some nine inches across, sitting on top of a foot-high stem, with leaf overlapping neighboring leaf. The nodding white flowers are hidden beneath the leafy canopy, and bloom only on plants that have two leaflets. By mid-summer a fleshy, yellowish eggshaped fruit about two inches long appears, again hidden by the leaves.



The fruit is edible when ripe, but all other parts of the plant are toxic. The roots produce a toxic action on cell division and have been used in anti-cancer therapies. But when eaten with abandon the plant can lead to death. Amerindians made an insecticide from powdered roots.

Sometimes after periods of rainfall in midsummer, the may-apple leaf becomes spotted with orangeyellow spots, from a fungus. There is no treatment and the plants quickly recover.

May-apple is sometimes called hog-apple, mandrake or wild lemon. ❖

Photos: Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) from vnps.org
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.