

LIVE FREE AND DIG

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by Janet Hill
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LITTLETON GARDEN CLUB

Ephemeral plants

Ephemeral comes from the Greek 'ephemerōs' meaning only lasting a day. Ephemeral plants have adapted to a challenging environment in which they can emerge quickly and then die back to their underground parts. They usually last more than a day! In the North Country woods we are blessed with many spring ephemerals. There are also desert ephemerals that have adapted to times when there are short wet periods and mud flat ephemerals that show themselves when there are short periods of low water.

Have you ever noticed that in the spring there is a wealth of blooming plants, such as trillium, both red, painted and white, ladies' slippers, star flowers, spring beauties, Dutchman's breeches, squirrel corn and blue bead, to name a few? These are our ephemerals. They have adapted to their environment by blooming when there is still sunlight reaching them before the deciduous trees open their leaves and form a canopy.



Some of them make seeds that will produce next year's blooms. The foliage of others dies back, leaving a root, bulb or rhizome that will send up its flower next spring. Together with birds migrating back to our forests, they herald the new season.

The pink lady's slipper is one of the later ephem-

erals to bloom, appearing towards the end of May. It was chosen as the official N H wildflower in 1991. Its large, showy, drooping flowers earned it this honor. Its botanical name is cypripedium which is a mixture of Greek and Latin. Cypri refers to the island of Cyprus that was the mythical birthplace of Venus, and

pedium means a shoe or slipper, so cypripedium means Venus' slipper. Its common name is moccasin flower. All its parts have been used medicinally to relieve pain, to stimulate appetite, and as a sedative. These beauties have been given the designation of "special concern" because of habitat loss and over collection. They should not be transplanted as they are very delicate and have specific requirements. The roots are easily damaged. Of the many varieties of ladies slippers, five are native to New England.

Once the canopy of leaves has opened up in our woods, there are no wild flowers to be found on the forest floor. It is then that we look to our sunny gardens for blooms. So we cherish our spring ephemerals!

The Littleton Garden Club is a group of active people. A highlight of its spring schedule is a wildflower walk. New members are welcome. To learn more, visit the club's Web site at <https://www.littletongardenclub.org>.