

Notes from a Naturalist

Matt Mahoney

Spring's forest floor vanguard

As we move into the last week of April, it's getting closer to the time that the wet and dank browns of the leaf litter on the forest floor, newly emerged to the air after being submerged under winter's snow pack, give way to a wave of patchy, vibrant colors.

Unlike the fall foliage that brings hordes of visitors to our mountains, the emergence of wildflowers from their winter dormancy is a hidden secret, a time for locals to enjoy the forest floor sights of the first couple weeks of May before the flowers climb higher up the slopes.

Ephemeral spring wildflowers are one of the greatest joys and sights of spring in the mountains. Few things in the woods can provide such a lift to the spirit as spotting the first bit of color emerging from the dead leaves of last year on the ground.

Ephemeral wildflowers are quick growing and generally go to seed quite fast. They bloom in the short window of time when the trees are still devoid of sun blocking foliage and when the soil is warm enough to instigate sprouting.

Every plant and flower has its desired temperature for sprouting. The common spring ephemerals in our area all have similar timing, blooming and sprouting shortly after the ground thaws out and the snowpack is gone. Being perennials, they wait patiently under the snowpack all winter for their time in the sun.

Generally, the first two weeks



Squirrel corn, with its lavender-tinged, heart-shaped flowers, have a smell reminiscent of fresh hyacinth. (MATT MAHONEY PHOTO)

of May are the peak of the wildflower season in the lower elevations and valleys. No need to posthole through snow into the high elevations, the action is down low in early in May.

The very end of April though is when they should begin their search because some early bloomers will start at this time, especially on warmer south facing slopes.

In addition, there are a couple of species that are known for appearing in late April, forming the vanguard of our beautiful spring ephemeral wildflowers. Our two most consistently early woodland wildflowers are the trailing arbutus and sharp-lobed hepatica. No wildflower in our parts has quite the powerfully

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