



CULTIVATION NOTES

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Bloodroot

Sanguinaria canadensis L.
A Rhode Island Native Plant

Family PAPAVERACEAE
by William R. Eddleman

One of my earliest experiences with wildflowers, and one of the most memorable, occurred when I was in sixth grade. Our teacher was a great source of lore on the local Missouri wildflowers, and took some of us on several trips to identify the local spring flora. One of these was Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), which not only is one of the most striking early spring wildflowers in eastern deciduous forests, but also has the added attraction (to children, at least) of orange-red sap that is exuded by the rhizomes when cut. This sap was used by Native Americans (and children!) as a body paint and dye.

Bloodroot was once considered more than just a dye, however, and was much used in folk medicine. John Bartram listed the rhizome as a cure for jaundice when powdered and administered with beer, and it was said that it could be used as a cure for rattlesnake bites. The rhizome is an emetic, cathartic, and expectorant, although it was used with caution. Following the ancient doctrine of signatures, it was sometimes recommended for diseases of the blood. Finally, Bloodroot, in combination with Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) was recommended as a preventive for bilious fever when administered with molasses.

Bloodroot is a common member of the spring flora throughout eastern North America in deciduous woods from Nova Scotia to Florida, and west to Nebraska. It grows best in moist (not wet) soils, that are neutral to slightly acidic and rich in organic matter. It does tolerate drier soils, although the plants are usually less robust and often fail to bloom on such sites. The flowers emerge before the leaves are fully unfurled. Flowers are white, with up to 12 strap-shaped petals, and a cluster of yellow stamens in the center. Bloodroot leaves are also unique in shape, being roughly rounded, with several deep, irregular lobes. The leaves are a shade of gray-green. A double-flowered cultivar with longer-lasting flowers is available commercially (*Sanguinaria canadensis* 'Multiplex'). This cultivar is sterile, however, and can only be propagated by division.

In cultivation, Bloodroot is most effective in mass plantings in a moist site with light shade such as a shade or woodland garden setting. The soil should be improved frequently with organic matter. Bloodroot can be readily combined with other spring ephemerals. The leaves provide an interesting contrast to other wild and cultivated plants. Bloodroot naturalizes well in rich soil, and readily self-seeds if left undisturbed. Although the flowers are relatively short-lived, they bloom at a time in early spring when most gardeners are eager to see blooms after the winter hiatus. Gardeners who desire more color in summer may wish to conceal the yellowing leaves of bloodroot by planting summer annuals nearby.



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Sanguinaria canadensis

L. Bloodroot

Perennial. White flowers in late April, 3/4 to 4", with 8-12 narrow white petals and numerous yellow stamens, borne singly on 4-6" stems arising between the folded halves of the leaf. Leaf bluish gray, roundish, deeply lobed, and scalloped; opening fully as the flower is fading. Leaves often yellow and die back before fall. Grows in partial to high filtered shade in moist, loamy soils. Occurs throughout eastern North America, although less common in Rhode Island than farther west and south.

Propagation from divisions: Can be moved at any time during the growing season, although flowering and health can be adversely affected if moved too early in the season. It is best to lift the plants soon after the leaves begin to yellow and fade. At this time, clumps may also be divided. Break soil away from the clump to expose the rhizomes. Cut the rhizomes into pieces that include one or more buds and dust the cut ends of the rhizome with a fungicide. Replant and water immediately.

Seed collection and treatment: Bloodroot seed cannot be stored for spring sowing because each seed has a fleshy aril (small white appendage) that must not dry out. Stratified seed tends to rot, and germination is very slow or absent if the aril dries. A week or two after petals drop, long, erect, light green seed capsules develop. Check these capsules four weeks after flowering and every few days thereafter. Capsules are mature when they yellow slightly and appear puffy. Each capsule contains 25 or more seeds, which are green when immature and turn brown at ripening. Collect the seed capsules when the seeds begin to turn brown (check one for signs of darkening of the seeds). Collect entire capsules before they split. Store capsules in a cool place in a plastic bag containing 1/4 cup of moist soil. When capsules split and shed seeds, sow them immediately in an outdoor seedbed enriched with a good supply of humus or compost. Cover with a thin layer of soil and tamp lightly. Keep the seedbed moist throughout the remainder of the growing season. Seedlings will emerge the following spring and can be moved to their permanent location when the foliage begins to yellow later in the summer.

Cultivation: Bloodroot can be established in light or filtered shade under hardwood trees, but not in full sun. Plants benefit from an annual application of compost or general fertilizer, and may be mulched with rotted leaves. Clumps need not be divided once established, and make a more striking display if left intact. Readily self sows, and ants often distribute the seeds. RIWPS Policy: Never dig plants in the wild without written permission of the landowner. Take seeds sparingly.

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- Illustration** from Mrs. Dana's *How to Know the Wildflowers*, Dover Publications, Inc., NY.