

## Wild Geranium, Wild Cranesbill, *Geranium maculatum*

By Anne B. Wagner

Family: *Geraniaceae*

Always a bridesmaid, never a bride" could be the lament of our native Wild Geranium, a modest plant which rarely rates the adulation accorded such spring woodland stars as Trillium, Bloodroot, and Blue Phlox. But in masses along a woodland path in May, the plant is stunning as its pink flowers bloom and, even later, the mounding clumps of green foliage remain attractive. Every few years at Fort Barton in Tiverton, pink Wild Geranium, blue violets and white plumes of False Solomon's seal bloom simultaneously, creating a scene of breathtaking, delicate beauty.

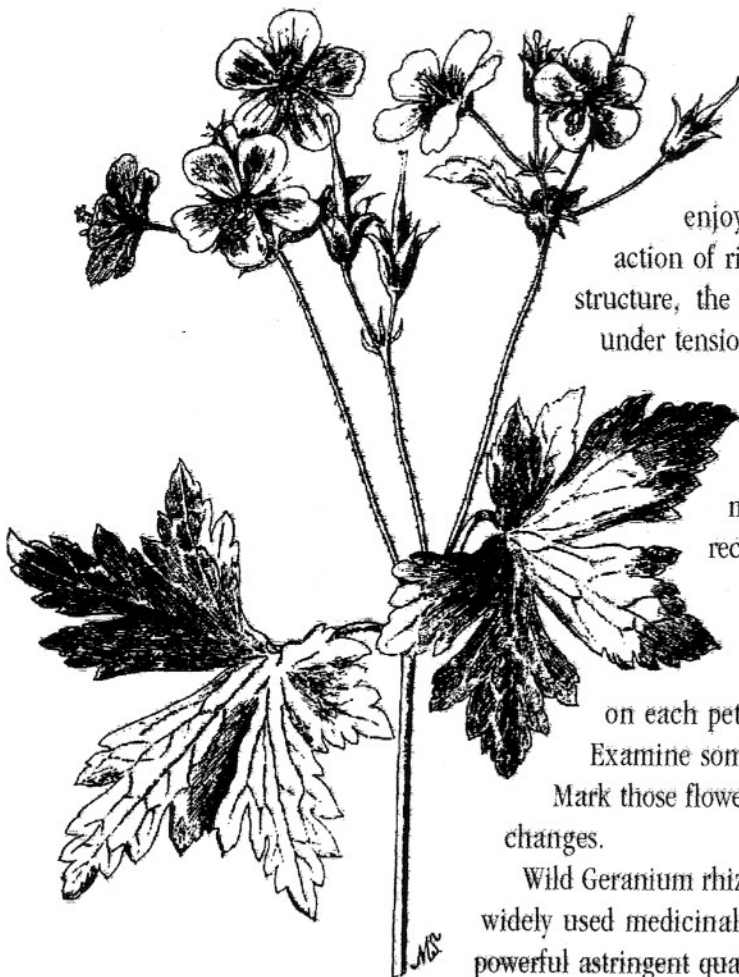
The Greek physician Dioscorides is said to have bestowed the name "geranium" to a group of plants with long, pointed fruits resembling a crane's bill, which is an alternate name for geraniums. "Geranos" is Greek for "crane." The species name "maculatum" means "spotted" and probably refers to the pale patches that sometimes appear on old leaves.

Wild Geranium fruits are fascinating structures. If you enjoy popping Jewelweed seedpods, you'll get a kick out of the action of ripe geranium fruit. As seeds ripen inside the long, pointed structure, the tissues of the fruit dry and shrink, putting the capsule seams under tension. Eventually, the seams split, and the coverings recoil outward and upward, ejecting seeds with force. The curled coverings remain attached at the tip of the beak, presenting a unique form characteristic of this plant. If you come upon mature fruits before they split, you may be able to trigger the recoil mechanism by lightly touching the seedpod.

Geranium flowers are protandrous, that is, the stamens mature and shed pollen before the stigma is receptive, thus avoiding self-fertilization. Prominent, transparent, dark beelines on each petal guide the bees and syrphid flies that act as pollinators. Examine some flowers to see whether they are in male or female stage.

Mark those flowers with a thread and check them the next day to notice any changes.

Wild Geranium rhizomes are rich in tannin. It was one of the most favored and widely used medicinal plants of North American native peoples, who utilized its powerful astringent qualities to treat sores, to stem hemorrhaging, to shrink hemorrhoids, and to stop diarrhea.



In landscaping and in gardens, Wild Geranium is useful and beautiful. Plant it in masses in deciduous woodlands and along woodland edges and allow it to naturalize, or group plants in the front or middle of a border. Underplant specimen trees with this woodland beauty. Geranium mixes companionably with other spring-blooming wildflowers, such as Blue Phlox, Wood Poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*), Jack-in-the-Pulpit, Trillium, Toothworts and the white-flowered form of Wild Bleedingheart (*Dicentra eximia*). It combines beautifully with ferns—Cinnamon, Ostrich, Maiden hair—to provide a wonderfully textured green mass all summer, by itself or as a backdrop to summer wildflowers—Cardinal Flower comes to mind.

### **Description and Cultivation**

Wild Geranium is a woodland perennial that forms a mounding clump about 12"–18" tall by 12" wide from thick rhizomes. It prefers moist, humusy soil, but tolerates a range of conditions, occurring in deciduous woodlands, along woodland edges and roadsides, and even on rocky slopes and open areas where moisture is plentiful. The plant can be found in every eastern state, but Florida, and across the Mississippi to the short-grass prairies, North into Canada. Hairy stems raise the loose clusters of rosy-pink, saucer-shaped, 1¼-inch flowers above the foliage for 4–6 week bloom time in April–June. Each of the five rounded petals features dark pink beelines. Palmate leaves, deeply cut into five lobes, arise from the rhizome. The entire plant has a delicate appearance and is attractive even when not in bloom. Wild Geranium is trouble-free and requires little maintenance, although drought may cause leaves to yellow and induce early dormancy. In late fall, mulch with chopped leaves and a few shovels full of compost.

### **Propagation**

By division: In Fall, lift dormant plants and cut pieces of rhizome, with each piece having 2 or 3 buds and some roots. Replant, adding a shovelful of compost and mulching with chopped leaves. By seed: Seeds of Wild Geranium are hydrophilic, that is, a dry seed is a dead seed. Watch ripening fruits carefully. As seed capsules begin to yellow or darken, pick them and put in a small paper bag where they can dry and dehisce the oval brown seeds. Gather the seed and sow immediately in pots, flats, or nursery beds. Ninety days of cold, moist stratification, followed by exposure to 70 degrees, initiates germination. Seeds may be kept in short-term storage by placing them in a plastic bag with some moist vermiculite and then storing in the refrigerator. As plants go dormant at the end of their first season, plant outside in a permanent location.

### **RIWPS Policy**

Never dig plants in the wild or without the written permission of the landowner. Please take seeds sparingly.

#### **References:**

1. Cullina, William. *The New England Wildflower Society Guide to Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada*. Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
2. Eastman, John. *The Book of Forest and Thicket*. Stackpole Books, 1992.
3. Erichsen-Brown, Charlotte. *Medicinal and Other Uses of North American Plants*. Dover Publications, 1989.
4. Gleason, H.A., Cronquist, Arthur. *Manual of Vascular Plants of the Northeastern United States and Adjacent Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York Botanic Garden, 1991.
5. Phillips, Harry R. *Growing and Propagating Wildflowers*. University of North Carolina Press. 1985.
6. Stokes, Donald and Lillian. *A Guide to Enjoying Wildflowers*. Little, Brown & Co., 1985.
7. Website: [www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/](http://www.mobot.org/gardeninghelp/)