

# NATURE NOW

By Lydia King Frehse  
Special Writer for The Birmingham Eccentric

## Hepatica Harbinger Of Spring Weather

Those of us who hie ourselves early to the spring woods, there to walk among last year's dead leaves, may come upon the lovely hepatica or liverleaf. The generic name is from the Greek for liver and refers to the shape of the three-

parted leaves. The majority of our woodland wild flowers bloom and set their seed early, thus protruding from the sunny which lifts through the empty branches. After the blue sky is shut out by a canopy of leaves, wild flower bloom moves to the meadows and roadsides. Although the hepatica is often called the first wild flower of spring, it is preceded within our range by at least two others. These are the lowly skunk cabbage which blooms at the margin of icy waters as early as late February and a small member of the parsley family (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) commonly called "harbinger-of-spring" or "pimpernel." The latter name comes from its dark anthers and white petals. Because of its early and its tiny flowers, it is seldom noticed.

WE HAVE TWO species of hepatica, *H. acutiloba* and *H. triloba*. They differ chiefly in the shape of the leaf, the former being more pointed than the latter. However, your scribe has both species growing in her wild flower garden brought in from nearby woods. The two tend to hybridize making identification difficult.

A sunny sloping hillside in a hardwood area is a favorite haunt of the hepatica although it also blooms profusely in sheltered areas of such trees as beech, maple and oak. It makes a gay spot of varicolored bloom from white to pink, pale blue, lavender and purple. The six to 20 colored sepals take the place of petals which open to the sun and close at night. They are centered by the ovary or seed box which is surrounded by many stamens. All is enclosed in three small green bracts closely resembling a calyx. Each flower is borne on a hairy stem; in fact, the flower appears to be wrapped in fur as if to protect itself from the cold.

AT BLOOMING TIME the plant is centered by numerous flower leaves. The latter appear rusty and tattered as a result of winter's hazards. The seasonal growth of new hairy leaves comes in spring after the plant has resumed. These carry over through the winter so that with the first warmth of the sun there is no effort wasted in leaf-growing; the plant needs only to send up its flower stalks and bloom.

Perfect flowers of the hepatica are self-pollinating. However the early pollen-seeking flies, female bees and the earliest butterflies are busy feeding upon the pollen and no doubt assist in the fertilization process.

JOHN BURROUGHS wrote of the fragrance of certain of the hepaticas, noting that it is faint and resembles that of sweet violets. Your scribe, always exhilarated by the spring woods, may not have sampled enough blooms to detect this added charm. Encouraged by the above naturalist she will try again.

Once more as spring comes round bearing its ephemeral gift of wild flowers all who love the ways of the woods and fields are reminded that there are a fast vanishing part of the American scene.

With the rapid encroachment of our urban areas there is only one answer, the setting aside of more protected natural areas. We recently heard an official of our national park system say "What we save in the next few years is all that ever will be saved."

Such organizations as the Audubon Society, Botany clubs and especially the Natural Areas Council are bending every effort to acquire suitable lands while there is yet time. They need your support and mine.

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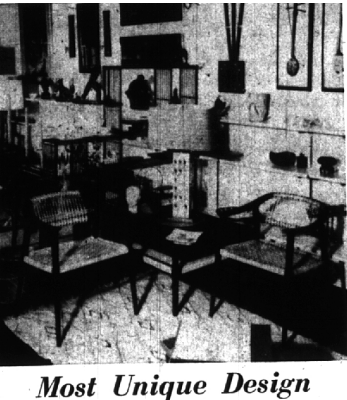
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