

Purple Trillium (*Trillium erectum*)



squawroot, birthroot, or stinking Benjamin. It is a spring ephemeral blooming in April and May in rich woods.

Trilliums have an amazing life history. When a seed germinates, the new plants first year of life may be entirely underground, growing into a strong rhizome. Eventually the young trillium will push a single leafed plant up through the soil. For one or more years this single leafed plant will gather energy to store in its growing rhizome. After a few years the new spring plant will sprout three leaves, but no flower. Look around any trillium you find in the forest and you will surely find these one and three leaved plants. After as many as 7 years of maturing, the rhizome will have grown large enough to support a spring flower. From this point on, the plant will produce a flower the rest of its life, which can be as long as 50 years.



“Stinking Benjamin” is perhaps the most unusual of monikers for the purple trillium. It comes from the fact that these maroon flowers produce a nasty odor. Another moniker, “wet-dog trillium,” makes reference to the odor, but it is just as often described as the scent of decaying meat. Add the maroon color of its petals and to an insect, the flower may resemble a dead animal just enough to investigate. And that is all the trillium “wants,” - a curious gnat to investigate, rub up against some pollen, and then shoot off to another flower to pass that pollen along to complete cross-pollination.

Birthwort is a name some Indian tribes have given to purple trillium for its supposed properties in easing the pain of childbirth.

Trilliums are often thought of as rare plants, but most species are quite abundant, including the purple trillium. Increasing development in old forests poses some threat to these plants. Promoting conservation of woodlands will go a long way to maintaining the population of trillium. However, if conservation efforts fail, trilliums are generally successfully transplanted. If you choose to rescue some of these plants from imminent destruction, remember to gather as much soil as possible during

the transplant. Be aware, trilliums may take many years before storing enough energy to blossom again.