

Toothwort (*Cardamine diphylla*)  
Cut-leaved toothwort (*Cardamine concatenate*)



A cluster of 4-petaled flowers tops this 8-12 inch tall woodland beauty. The four narrow petals, which may have a hint of pink on them, are arranged in a cross. This is characteristic of plants in the mustard family. Four sepals and six stamens are also traits of toothwort and other Mustard family members.



Note the grouping of 3, very deeply divided leaves below the cluster of flowers on Cut-leaved Toothwort. You can see it has a very appropriate name. Toothwort's leaves are quite different. Two leaves are borne opposite each other, each with 3 leaflets. Each leaflet is oblong and pointed and toothed around the edges, not nearly cut as deeply as Cut-leaved toothwort.

The reason for the name "toothwort" is not evident on the surface. These plants grow up from a rhizome that has many tiny, tooth-like projections. The Doctrine of Signatures is an ancient belief that plants provide hints of their medicinal value through their structure. According to the Doctrine of Signatures, the tiny tooth-like nodules on the rhizome indicated that it could provide a cure for toothaches, so it was used as such. Unfortunately, this has not been shown to be true. Modern medicine has since whitewashed the Doctrine of Signatures, but it was something to go by for ancient physicians.

Although not a cure for toothaches, the rhizome does have a peppery taste. It may have felt it was doing something beneficial when it was chewed. Rhizomes were routinely dug up and nibbled on the spot or used to flavor cooking. Many species in the mustard family have parts that provide flavor as you well know if you squirt the stuff on your hot dog. Nance's, French's, McCormic, or whatever brand you use comes from the seed of commercially grown mustard plants.

