

Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*)



A solitary yellow flower of trout lily arises from a pair of fleshy dark green leaves with purple mottling. Each leaf is 3 to 8 inches long and 1 to 1.5 inches wide at its widest. The leaves taper to a point at both ends. Solitary leaves are more rounded and much smaller. These leaves produce no flowers, but gather and store energy for future blossoms. The flowers appear upside down as the pistils and stamens hang downward with the yellow petals re-curved upward to expose the sexual parts. The three yellow petals are mottled with brown or purple spots as are the three petal-like sepals. The sepals are often darker on the back than the petals. Stamens occur in two rings of three each achieving a total of six male parts.

A similar White Trout Lily (*Erythronium albidum*) can also be found in moist woods from southern Canada west to Minnesota and South to Florida. The petals are white or sometimes bluish and the stigma of the pistil is much more deeply cleft into three parts.

An alternative common name, dog-tooth violet, refers to the tiny tooth-shaped corm from which the leaves and flower arise. Trout lily comes from either the mottled leaves resembling the coloration of the trout or that the blooms occur during the start of the traditional trout season.



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As you walk through a forest in the spring, you might spot a single trout lily blossom. Look around and you will see many leaves with the wrong shape, but the same green with purple mottling. These single leaves are the younger relatives of that flowering plant. In fact, they still may be connected. You see, it takes a lot of energy to produce a flower and flowers are not always successfully pollinated. So trout lily is hedging its bets. The mature plant not only sends a flower up from its underground corm, but it also sends off shoots at the end of which develop new corms. As these corms mature,

the shoot connecting them to the mother plant withers away and a new plant is created. The new plant sends its roots deep into the soil, which makes them a great ground cover to prevent erosion. Each year this new plant sends up a single leaf to gather energy and store it in the growing corm. It may take 4 or more years, but eventually the corm will have collected enough energy to produce its first flower. It too will then also continue the process of sending out shoots to create new corms of its own.

Not only are flowers energy intensive, but so is the development of nectar, that sweet bribe for pollinating insects. To help ensure that only the right pollinators have access to this energy drink, the trout lily bends its head. The curved stalk and upside down flower make access difficult for the crawling insects and easier for the fliers. A flying insect often covers a greater area and is therefore more likely to find a non-related flower to which it may pass the trout lily's pollen.

The great American Naturalist John Burroughs once lamented that the poor trout lily did not have a fitting name. He preferred fawn lily, as many western species are called, because the mottling reminded him of the spotting of the fawn. It has also been called Adder's tongue, lamb's tongue, deer's tongue, and scrofula root. The latter is as a supposed cure for this skin disease.



American Indians collected and stored the roots to be eaten as a vegetable. Yet some herbalists say that its best use is to induce vomiting. So it may not be such a good idea to collect your own roots.

Over-harvesting by private collectors is a threat to all showy wildflowers. This flower can be easily transplanted, but care should be taken to maintain wild populations. Do not harvest in protected areas, like parks, and have permission from landowners when removing from private property. Rescuing from development can be good way for those interested in creating wildflower gardens on their own property.