

Northern Blue Violet (*Viola septentrionalis*)

Identification:

The Northern blue violet is a stemless violet, so no leaves appear on the same stem as the flowers. The flowering stalk is downy. The small round leaves are slightly hairy and often purplish below. The lower three petals of the flower are all bearded, which is a good identifying characteristic. Common Blue Violet (*Viola papilionacea*) is very similar, but only the two lateral petals are hairy and the flower stalk is smooth. The Woolly Blue Violet (*Viola sororia*) is very similar to the Northern blue, but as its name implies, the leaf stalk and underside of the leaves are much hairier.

Habitat can also help with identification, as this plant is more common in coniferous forests. Woolly and Common Blue violets like moister locations.



Natural History:

Blue violets are generally pollinated by bees. Bees can see blue and use the nectar guides and landing lip, or lower petal, to find and access the flower. Pollinators are rewarded for their visits with a bit of nectar. While harvesting the nectar, the pollinator often inadvertently brushes past the stamens and picks up a load of pollen. I say inadvertently, but in reality, that is exactly what the violet wants to happen. Now the hope, if plants can hope, is that the pollinator will travel to another Northern blue violet and while searching for nectar brush past the pistil and deposit some of that pollen there. Hence the plant is cross-pollinated and a mix of genetic material is assured.



Unfortunately, cross-pollination is a risky business and often fails. So the Northern Blue Violet has a backup plan. Down near the base of the plant you might see these bud-like structures. These are actually cleistogamous, or closed, flowers. They are self-pollinating and produce viable seeds, although the resulting plants will be genetically similar to the parent plant.