

Spring Beauty (*Claytonia caroliniana*)
Description by Julie Forkner



If you want to see spring beauty in bloom, get to the woods before the trees leaf out. Spring beauty grows from a starchy rhizome, where it stores all the energy it made the previous season to fuel its early spring growth. A single pair of elongated oval leaves appears halfway up the short stem. The white and pink flowers grow in terminal clusters – that’s botany lingo for a group of flowers that appear at the end of the stem. Each flower has six white petals streaked with pink veins. The very bottom of each petal is tinged with yellow so that it looks like there is a faint yellow circle in the middle of each flower. There are two

different spring beauties – *Claytonia caroliniana* and *Claytonia virginiana*. If the leaves are long and grass like and you are in the higher elevations, chances are you’re looking at *Claytonia virginiana*. The leaves of *Claytonia caroliniana* are broader and not as long, and that species is more common at the lower elevations.

The pink veins and yellow circle on the flower petals act as a landing pad for pollinators. Because those pollinators are generally out and about when the sun is shining, spring beauty only opens on sunny days.

Claytonia virginiana is of special interests to scientists because it has an unstable number of chromosomes. In almost every other species, the number of chromosomes is fixed – in humans that number is fixed at 46. In spring beauty, however, that number



can vary from one individual plant to the next. Wildlife also loves spring beauty. Deer and wild hogs dig the starchy tuber for lunch. Some people say that the raw root tastes like a radish, but when it’s baked it tastes like a cross between a baked potato and roasted chestnuts.

Spring beauty populations are large and frequent throughout their habitat. They also make a beautiful addition to a wildflower garden and many native plant enthusiasts are helping to preserve the gene pool of this delicate, spring ephemeral.

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