

'Stinking benjamin' leads trillium parade

By Timothy Nowicki
Special writer

Spring is a great time to walk through the woods. The temperature is neither too hot nor too cold, and the pecky insects have not arrived yet.

Many metropolitan parks and nature centers around the city provide excellent opportunities to walk woodland trails. Some even have self-guided trails with interesting features and plants identified.

One of the most striking plants that you will see in most areas with rich soil is the trillium, a relative of the lily.

There are several species throughout Michigan, but one of the first to bloom in spring is the red trillium or "stinking benjamin." The petals of this plant are a dark, rich maroon color.

SOME OF MY students and I saw a couple plants blooming in the Quickstand Woods behind Kimball High School in Royal Oak.

Red trillium do not grow in large groups like the large-flowered trillium. Instead, single plants are found scattered throughout the woods.

The other common name for the red trillium, stinking benjamin, refers to the odor produced by the flower. We had to get down on our hands and knees to smell the "wet dog" odor of the flower, and even then the odor was faint. But the odor is strong enough to attract flies to the flower for pollination.

The most common species of trillium around the Detroit area is the large-flowered trillium with its

three white petals. Like the red, painted nodding and all the other species of trillium, the large-flowered trillium has three leaves, three sepals and three petals. In fact, the name trillium originated from the Latin prefix for three — "tri."

WE WERE FORTUNATE to be able to see both the red and large-flowered trillium in bloom.

The leaves of the two species were very much alike. All three leaves were broad at the base where they attached to a single place on the stem and then tapered to a point sharply.

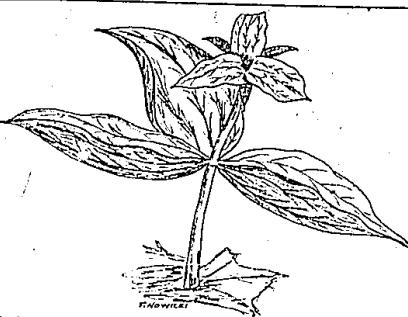
The sepals (petal-like structures that enclose the new flower bud) pointed outward from between two petals in both species. One student remarked that it

looked like it had six petals instead of three.

Spring wildflowers like the trillium we saw, rise from the ground early in the spring. However and then die away before summer arrives. They are "rush-blooming" flowers and cannot tolerate the shade created by the leaves of trees in summer.

MANY SPRING wildflowers would have finished blooming by now, but the cool spring of 1984 has prolonged their blooms.

Even so, before June arrives, the trillium petals of the trillium will no longer be green. It most looks like another species, but it is just a sign of aging and the end of the season for trillium.



*TIMOTHY NOWICKI

The trillium, a relative of the lily, is protected by law. Its name is derived from its three petals.

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