

Wildflower in Focus

By Melanie Choukas-Bradley
Artwork by Tina Thieme Brown

Trailing Arbutus (Mayflower)

Epigaea repens L.
Heath Family (*Ericaceae*)



One of Maryland's earliest and most delightful spring wildflowers is trailing arbutus, a low-growing plant with a woody stalk, leathery evergreen leaves, and five-lobed pink or white flowers. The flowers have an unforgettable, almost tropically bold fragrance that is well worth getting down on your hands and knees to experience. When and where you find trailing arbutus in bloom, inhale deeply, but please do not disturb this now uncommon Maryland wildflower or its habitat.

Trailing arbutus is the state flower of Massachusetts and the provincial flower of Nova Scotia. Generations who have endured the long cold northeastern winters have appreciated the early spring blooms of this plant. According to Smithsonian botanist Stan Shetler, trailing arbutus "has long evoked rich sentiments in poetry and lore. In New England and elsewhere, the common name is mayflower. This name is said to date to the Pilgrims, who found it abundant around

Plymouth, Massachusetts, and the first bloom to assure them that their first terrible winter was over. John Greenleaf Whittier wrote a poem, *The Mayflowers*, that captures the timeless lure of this wildflower. As the name of the English hawthorn and the ship that brought them to America, 'Mayflower' evoked fond memories for the Pilgrims."

Trailing arbutus has a persistent woody stem, and although it is diminutive in size, botanical manuals group it with shrubs. The plant is in the heath family, along with showy flowering shrubs such as mountain laurel, azalea, and rhododendron, as well as huckleberry and blueberry - important fruit sources for wildlife. Maryland woodlands from the Allegheny Plateau to the Coastal Plain - particularly those with acidic soils - harbor many native heath family members.

Specific Characteristics of Trailing Arbutus

Flowers: Pale pink or white, highly fragrant, each flower a small tube ending in 5 flared lobes. About 1/2" long, growing in small terminal and upper axillary clusters.

Leaves: Alternate, evergreen, leathery. Ovate or oblong, with entire margin and a rounded or heart-shaped base. Leaves 3/4 - 3 1/2" long, often pubescent, especially on upper surface and along the margin and petiole.

Growth Habit: A trailing plant with a woody stem, growing close to the ground.

Habitat and Range: Rocky or sandy acidic soil; Newfoundland to Saskatchewan, south to Florida, Mississippi and Iowa. In Maryland, you'll often find it along partially eroded roadsides and trailsides.

Herbal Lore: North American Indians used trailing arbutus leaf tea for urinary tract disorders and as a blood purifier. A folk remedy for kidney stones, Shakers sold it as "gravel plant." Although apparently effective, it does have toxic properties. The plant was extirpated in many areas because of its popularity as an herbal remedy and spring wildflower.

Blooming Time in Maryland: March - May.

Locations: Throughout the state but uncommon in most areas due to collecting and habitat disturbance. In the Washington, D.C. area - Rock Creek Park, Great Falls, Virginia, Seneca Creek State Park, Sugarloaf Mountain, Quiet Waters Park, and many other regional parks. Consult **Finding Wildflowers in the Washington-Baltimore Area** by Cris Fleming, Marion Blois Lobstein and Barbara Tufty for other locations near the cities.

Please remember to treat this uncommon wildflower and its habitats with utmost respect!