

# Taking Cues From Mother Nature



**ASK THE "EXPERT"**  
Peter Leuzinger *Peter Leuzinger Consulting, Inc.*

Dog-Tooth Violet  
(*Erythronium americanum*)



Jack in the Pulpit  
(*Arisaema triphyllum*)



Virginia Blue Bells  
(*Mertensia virginicum*)



Rue False Anemone  
(*Enemion biteratum*)



Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginicum*)

*Appreciation for flowers came at an early age. My father, a greenhouse owner and operator taught my sister and me a lot about growing plants. We grew cut flowers for wholesale distribution and bedding plants for the retail part of the business back in the '60s. We learned what it took to grow a crop of "mums" and turn those beds around for the next crop. My favorite job was planting the 150-foot beds with chrysanthemum rooted cuttings. It took over 2000 young plants to paint the bed green with new life. The sterilized soil smelled clean, was a wonderful texture, easy to rake, mark and plant. It was a great feeling of accomplishment and a memorable experience I think of often. We learned about syringing, watering, pruning, disbudding, aphids, red spiders and short day crop management. It wasn't long before the football mums and "pompoms" were harvested, wrapped and sold.*

*All these spring plants signal the beginning of another growing season.*

Throughout it all, I never lost my appreciation for flowers and many of my friends know that was one of the reasons I chose the golf course for a career. The diversification in horticulture mimics golf course management. I must admit that my college degree in horticulture did not prepare me for what turned out to be my signature in golf; my love for native plants and habitat enhancements. However it produced wildlife beyond my expectations.

Throughout my golf course career, one of our family traditions was a woodland walk every Mother's Day. Everyone, young and old (three generations), walked the timber at Alta Vista near the Fox River and later the Nature Walk at St. Charles Country Club along Norton Creek. Each year, we witnessed the timber floor turn a carpet of wild flowers. The beauty was so phenomenal that it inspired us all to do a little research to identify and learn about these woodland plants. The list of our favorites include Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginicum*), Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), Dog-Tooth Violet (*Erythronium americanum*), May-Apple, (*Podophyllum peltatum*), Trillium, (*Trillium species*), Rue False Anemone (*Enemion biteratum*), Virginia Blue Bells (*Mertensia virginicum*) and Jack in the Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*). All these spring plants signal the beginning of another growing season. Spring Beauty literally covered the timber floor as it poked itself

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through the thick oak and hickory leaf mulch. Patches of Dog Tooth Violet (Lilly Trout) dotted the same landscape. If you looked closely enough, you could spot an occasional Jack in the Pulpit in its own small grouping. The bloom on these woodland wonders last longer during cool springs. All in all, the display lasts three to four weeks. After the blooms die back, the foliage keeps producing food for next year's crop. The summer heat causes the foliage to disappear and carbohydrates are returned to the bulblets and corms within the rich timber soil.

As delicate as these plants seem, we did discover how persistent they could be when trying to enhance our maintenance practices. Turf quality often suffers around and under oak groves on many golf courses. Competition for water, light and nutrients hurts the turf in the hot summer months. Furthermore, the practice of mowing weekly, especially when wet, produces unsightly muddy-wheel marked circles around individual groupings of trees. When trying to alleviate these problems, we made a very interesting discovery about woodland plants.

During one summer, we decided to stop mowing between tight groups of trees. The turf was nipped down with "weed eaters", a strip or two of turf sod was removed with the sod cutter on the perimeter of the new area and bark mulch was added to cover the nipped down turf from the tree trunks to sod strips. This practice produced a natural looking bed around many groups of trees. It not only helped the trees by lessening the competition for water, light, and nutrients with the existing turf, but also kept the machinery away from sensitive root zones and tender protective bark. As it turned out, many of these areas just looked better mulched or un-mowed. The discovery process continued.

Around Mother's Day the following year, much to our surprise, the bark mulch began to swell under the clusters of trees. What was going on? Behold! The emergence of woodland plants was phenomenal. Dog-Toothed Violets, May-Apple and Spring Beauty were the first of the volunteers to take advantage of the

reversal in habitat. How could these little plants survive years of golf course maintenance and traffic, not to mention the disturbance of construction and grassing years ago? To me, this was Mother Nature at her finest!

The second and third year were met with anticipation when even more native plants filled the beds. These beds were not weedy looking. On the contrary, they looked like they had always been there. Hmmmmm, isn't that ironic?

A person like me grows up in a greenhouse environment and learns to grow and control things for the good of the plants. This training continues through a college experience where I learn production and plant propagation with emphasis on controlled environments and production of top performing plants. However, very little is taught about self-sustaining producers that require very little manipulation. I have found this is the key to environmental management and a very valuable lesson for everyone. Often the best and most valuable property management practice is to lean toward sustainability. Choosing, promoting and installing sustainable plant material saves money, makes the job easier, is safer (fewer inputs), is beautiful throughout the entire year and it is rewarding. I chose to write an

article about native woodland plants as an example of sustainability and ultimately stewardship. Keep in mind there are many areas on the property you manage where choices toward sustainability exist. It may be a prairie, a wetland, or woodland, but remember there are opportunities right in front of you that you might not recognize, unless you leave it alone. That is the root of sustainability.




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Trillium, (*Trillium species*)

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