

Yellow Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*)

2-6" x 6-12" much-loved long-lived eastern woodland spring ephemeral. Can form carpets of low mottled foliage, with occasional flowers (or more if conditions right). Some colonies are hundreds of years old. Grows from deep-seated little spring bulb/corms. Above ground for two months, mid-March to late-May.

CT native, found on moist wooded slopes and bottomlands.

Emerges in March as a tightly wrapped cone of leaves pushing through soil.

There may be two forms of Trout Lily, though it's unclear whether the differences are genetic or due to growing conditions. Most commonly, the plant reproduces mostly vegetatively, forming swaths of single leaves, and seldom flowers. The other "kind" has larger leaves, spreads less, emerges later, and produces large paired leaves and a flower.

To add to the complexity, young plants produce just one leaf. Not until the corm is larger and has worked itself downwards into the soil, nearly a foot, will the plant have enough energy resources to produce two leaves, and then produce a flower. In any case, new plants don't flower until 4-7 years old, and in favorable conditions. Mature corms produce offsets like tulips, or garlic.

The 3-6" x 2" glossy broad and oval short-stalked leaves are unusual and beautiful, with gray, green, and brown mottling, said to echo the coloring of brook trout, with patches and colonies looking like a school of fish. Although leaves are attached at ground level, half the stem is actually underground and half forms the leafless flower stalk.

April flowers, atop stiff 8" stems, are a nodding 1.5" yellow, with 3 inner petals and 3 outer petals (technically "tepals"). The petals flare and bend backwards, looking windswept. The exterior of outer petals are brushed with red markings. The showy anthers and pollen are either red-brown or yellow. The flowers close at night and on overcast days.

The plant sends out stolonlike growth under leaf litter, resembling spaghetti, that seeks out deeper territory, then forms a new corm underground. The stolons then wither and die.

Stalks with heavy fruit capules bend down nearly to the ground.

As temperatures drop in winter, corms start making new roots.

Part shade to shade. Site in the area of deciduous trees. Before tree leaf-out, Trout Lilies appreciate bright spring sun. Moist or even damp acidic loose humusy fertile well-drained soil with organic matter preferred. Leaf litter or peat cover in winter is desirable, and is good to leave in place.

The issue of encouraging flowering: 1. Some say the best way to coax flowering is to plant in good soil and fertilize in spring. 2. Growing in pots, as our growers do, may ready the plant to bloom, though perhaps not the first year. 3. Some suggest dividing and re-planting corms of crowded leaves. But do check references for instructions on moving deep corms. Whole plants don't transplant well. 4. Finally, since Trout Lily is shy to bloom, you may want to be content with having a ground cover of distinctive lovely leaves, and welcoming occasional flowering.

Naturalize as a seasonal ground cover in shade, woodland gardens, openings, or by streambanks. Enchanting with other spring ephemerals. Ideally, interplant with summer woodland perennials to grow over areas where the Trout Lilies have gone dormant.

Early

season native bees, like Andrenas Bees, Mason Bees, and Queen Bumblebees, collect plant pollen and nectar, as do Bee Flies. These pollinators are critical for the plant, as Trout Lilies have limited ability to self-pollinate.

Trout Lily is not favored by deer.



Photos 1, 3, 8, 9: David G. Smith, Delaware Wildflowers
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