

Hepatica acutiloba (Sharp-lobed Hepatica)

Botanical Bytes by Bruner

By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 6-8"
Foliage Width: 6-8"
Flower Height: 8-10"
Foliage Color: Green
Flower Color: White to Pink Blush
USDA Hardiness: 4-9
Moisture: Average
Light: Part Sun



The delicate flower seems to reach for the rays of sunlight filtering through the naked branches of the towering trees. The woodland dweller clings to the leaf-covered bank above the gurgling stream, its flowers blushing pink in the early morning light. A brisk March breeze makes the petals appear to tremble in excitement at the chance to once again announce the arrival of spring.

Hepatica acutiloba, the plant described above, is native to almost half of the North American continent, ranging from Southern Georgia and Louisiana to northern Québec and Ontario. This early-blooming gem is often sighted on slopes in deciduous forests close to streams. These conditions create a site with well-drained rich organic soil that stays moist but not wet. A well-amended shade garden generally will mimic this sufficiently for the home gardener to enjoy this plant.

The common name varies from region to region, but a few are American Liverleaf, Sharp-lobed Hepatica, May Flower, or Mountain Hepatica. “Heper” in Greek actually means liver, referring to the shape of the leaves or possibly their color in the winter. Because the old leaves are present throughout the winter in the southern reaches of its range and provide nourishment for the plant, they should not be removed until the new dark-green, glossy three-lobed speckled leaves have emerged in the spring.

Color of flowers may range from a clear white to white with a blush of blue or pink. They are one of the earliest woodland flowers to bloom, with the fuzzy buds popping open before the leaves are on the trees in early spring (March in the south). The delicate flowers provide an early source of pollen for small bees and flies. Chipmunks are rumored to highly covet the seeds, but this does not harm the plants. Late fall division of the clumps is a much better option for propagation than fighting the chipmunks for the seeds. There are few other pest or disease problems that bother Hepatica.

Sharp-lobed Hepatica tea was used by American Indians to help soothe coughs and sore throats. Hepatica is no longer used as a common herbal remedy but when prepared correctly is a mild astringent and diuretic. Compounds in the leaves will even slow bleeding but may cause skin irritation. As a result, the leaves should not be used in first aid situations.

In the mid 1800s it was the main ingredient in “Dr. Rodger’s Liverwort and Tar Syrup”, which was sold widely as a cure for liver disease. Some believed it helped with everything from freckles to indigestion, or even cowardice. In 1883 over 200 tons of the leaves were harvested for domestic use or export. There was debate among the medical profession as to the effectiveness of these treatments.

Hepatica is an under-appreciated low-maintenance performer that is a wonderful early sign of spring. The interesting semi-evergreen foliage and the delicate blooms are more than enough reasons to adopt this leafy family member as part of your home garden.