

## YELLOW TROUT LILY (OR DOG-TOOTH VIOLET)

*Erythronium americanum*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

In early spring, look for a bright yellow flower, drooping towards the ground (“its eyes look downwards”). Each stem is only 4-6 inches tall with a solitary flower on top. A member of the lily family, the trout lily has flower parts in threes, i. e., 3 yellow “sepals” and 3 yellow “petals” and 6 stamens in two circles of three. The fleshy green leaves with purple mottling are equally distinctive in the forest litter.



season. It is important to choose an appropriate site, with sun in the spring — to warm the earth and provide enough light for the lilies to make and store food — and shade or partial shade in the summer. Trout lilies are lovely intermingled with other spring ephemerals such as bloodroot or spring beauties. They do not transplant well.

Because trout lilies are difficult to grow from seed, many bulb suppliers and nurseries sell the bulbs, which can be planted in the fall. If left undisturbed, plants will slowly spread by underground shoots. Despite its ability to spread, the trout lily is not considered an aggressive spreader but rather a delight to have in one’s garden. Trout lily grows best in moist, acidic woodland soils, but can adapt to growing in many types of gardens.

Remember to buy from nurseries that guarantee nursery-propagated seeds or plants as our native plants and habitats are at risk from being depleted.

The flowers have a short life, but the leaves remain as ground cover throughout the growing

The common name refers to the appearance of the flowers during trout fishing season, and to the brown and purple spotted leaves. “Dogtooth violet” refers to the appearance of the bulbs, although this plant is not related to violets. Trout lily is found throughout the state of Virginia, and ranges south to Florida and Alabama.

While not recommended today because of some toxicity, Iroquois women ate the leaves to prevent conception and the plant has anti-bacterial properties.

A close relative, *Erythronium umbilicatum* looks very much like *E. americanum*, but its fruit has a depression at the tip. The fruit of *E. americanum* is rounded or flat at the summit. *Erythronium umbilicatum* also occurs extensively in Virginia. ❖