

# MAYAPPLE

## BY TERRY BONACE, ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION GROUP

Each spring, in the understory of our Beverly Shores' woodlands, appear fresh green, double parasols of mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*). These familiar wildflowers, with their distinctive, umbrella-like leaves, grow in tight little colonies in many woodland remnants both in the town and in its neighboring parklands. Each plant hides a single, fragrant, waxy white flower under its pair of sheltering umbrellas. (Plants with just a single umbrella are immature and bear no flowers.) Growing and flowering mostly before our trees leaf out, mayapple is a "spring ephemeral," called such because it disappears underground before summer is finished.



Mayapple colony

Though nearly all of the plant is poisonous, a small fruit (the "apple" referred to in the name) of the mayapple is edible when ripe. The fruit ripens and turns yellow in July or August at about the same time the mayapple leaves wither away. The flavor is unique, reported to taste like a blend of tropical fruits and melons. If you decide to eat one, remember that the seeds are poisonous, even in the ripe fruit. You will also need to carefully monitor a population in order to find the fruit. Once the leaves disappear, the plant is hard to find and you have competition from hungry wild animals.



Mayapple flower

Sometimes poisonous things have medicinal properties. Chemicals derived from mayapple are used to treat warts and as chemotherapy agents against cancer.

Mayapple adapts well to shade and woodland gardens but spreads quickly by underground rhizomes. For a garden you must also keep in mind that it will leave an empty space in late summer when it fades away. It sends up a very interesting sprout, like an unopened green umbrella, in early spring. Its lobed and umbrella-like leaves and waxy white flowers are an excellent addition to any garden. Another benefit is that, even in times of very high deer population levels, deer seldom browse on them. Perhaps it is the poisonous nature of the plant.

Look at our web site at [www.bserg.org](http://www.bserg.org) for information on native and non-native, invasive plants. As always, the Environmental Restoration Group (ERG) will be glad to help identify plants for you and make suggestions for native replacements. Don't hesitate to contact Terry Bonace ([tbonace@gmail.com](mailto:tbonace@gmail.com)) or Candice Smith ([candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com](mailto:candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com))

---