

The First Flowers of Spring: Hepatica, Rue Anemone, and Cultural Ecology

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It's the first week of May, which marks the coming of middle spring here at Highland House in northern New Jersey. Early spring is still a fraught time for this gardener. The herbaceous perennials that define a woodland garden die back and disappear in the winter, leaving ominously bare ground. It is a leap of faith to believe they will come back, but come back they do, year

after year. Throughout March and April, there are still great gaps between the plants and last year's leaf layer covers the ground. By the end of May, the more mature areas of my woodland garden will have formed a green mulch, a thick layer of green that effectively suppresses weeds. This late spring condition will last until the summer drought, which usually hits around here soon after midsummer.

But in early spring, the first plants to tell me that all is well and that spring will come are two members of the Buttercup (*Ranunculaceae*) family, the Sharp-lobed hepatica (*Hepatica acutiloba*) and their distant relative, Rue anemone or Windflower (*Thalictrum thalictroides*). These earliest native flowers push through the leaf litter while the woodland floor is still a somber palette of browns and grays, offering delicate blooms that seem at odds with the lingering chill. Early spring bees and flies, which emerge when few other food sources are available visit these flowers. These plants both occupy similar ecological niches on woodland floors and share early spring bloom times, but hepaticas are basal-leaved, semi-evergreen plants with solitary flowers on multiple stems and leathery foliage, while rue anemone has delicate compound foliage and bears multiple flowers on each stem. Although they are somewhat closely related, their resemblance stems from convergent adaptation to the woodland spring ephemeral window more than anything else.



The complex leaves of Rue anemone (*Thalictrum thalictroides*). On the left, the fall-blooming Bottle gentian (*Gentiana clausa*)

Earlier this spring, I wrote about skunk cabbages—the very first native flowers of spring—and I hope one day they’ll establish themselves in my pond. But for now, to see them, I must go for a walk in the woods, while the hepaticas and rue anemones grace Highland House as our first spring blooms. Yet, for all of the obsession that gardeners worldwide have with non-native and exotic plants, these plants are too often overlooked. And while the Rue anemone is restricted to North America, the hepaticas—the focus of this brief excursion—are a living part of a horticultural heritage for many—from Asia to Europe to North America.

In Lithuanian tradition, the native blue *Hepatica nobilis* is known as *Žibutė* (or *Žibuoklė*, both stemming from the word for “shining”), the first visible sign of spring. *Žibutė* can be found in the woods near Vilnius, not far from Antakalnis Cemetery where my parents and my friend Valdas Ozarinskas are buried, growing amidst leaf litter. Finding its colorful bloom amid brown duff and lingering frost is to receive a confirmation that the world still turns, that seasons change. Children used to gather them for their mothers—although gathering wildflowers is not sustainable and should not be done—while elders note their appearance as a sign to begin preparing

the land for the spring. The appearance of *Žibutė* prefigures the first thunder of the spring, when Perkūnas, the thunder god, strikes the Earth and awakens it from sleep, a renewal celebrated in the Romuva religion at the end of April as Jorė.



The trilobed leaves of Common hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis*), growing in Pavilniai Regional Park, near Antakalnis Cemetery, Vilnius.

Similarly, in Sweden, the *blåsippa* (*Hepatica nobilis*) is cherished as a herald of spring. Blooming between April and May, it is one of the earliest spring flowers to appear, sometimes even pushing through snow-covered grounds. The blåsippa holds cultural significance, symbolizing the arrival of spring in Swedish folklore and traditions. Its early bloom is celebrated in children's songs and is a protected species in certain regions, reflecting its importance in Swedish natural heritage.

The flowers of the hepaticas emerge first, followed by their exotic-looking leaves that are a purple hue at first. Their Latin name—*Hepatica* comes from “hepar” meaning liver—connects these plants to ancient medical traditions. The Doctrine of Signatures, a medieval medical concept suggesting plants resembling body parts could treat ailments of those organs, guaranteed hepatica's place in early pharmacopeia, from the Mediterranean to the Baltics. Hepatica was an ingredient in patent medicine, notably Dr. Roger's Liverwort and Tar. In 1883 some 200 tons of hepatica leaves were imported for use in patent medicine. Indigenous peoples long recognized these early bloomers as medicine. Cherokee healers used rue anemone to treat diarrhea and vomiting, while certain tribes employed hepaticas as Europeans did, for liver ailments, or as anti-convulsants.¹

Hepatica appears across Europe and Asia in similar roles. In Japan, where *hanami* (flower viewing) elevates horticultural appreciation to cultural ritual, hepaticas hold a special place among collectors. Known as “Yukiwariso,” “the flower that breaks through the snow,” and first cultivated during the Edo period, Japanese hepaticas (*Hepatica nobilis* var. *japonica*) have inspired a devotion bordering on obsession. Specialists cultivate countless varieties distinguished by subtle variations in petal shape, color, and stamens, while also seeking new specimens in the woods—including, the story goes, specimens that appear to have mutated due to fallout from nuclear bombing in World War II. These prized plants command prices that would astonish Western gardeners, with rare varieties fetching thousands of dollars at specialized auctions.²



Rue anemone (*Thalictrum thalictroides*) coming up among Maidenhair fern (*Adiantum Pedatum*)

But there is no need to go abroad or to cultivate strange specimens. The first flowers of the American Northeast have their own quiet beauty. The Rue anemone emerges alongside the unfurling fronds of Maidenhair Fern (*Adiantum Pedatum*) in my rock garden, creating natural compositions that evoke Japanese garden aesthetics despite evolving continents apart. While contemplating these natural arrangements during the COVID lockdown in 2020, I began to envision an aesthetic specifically for a Northeastern American garden.

Conservation challenges loom for these woodland jewels. Climate change poses one threat, as shifting bloom times disrupt pollinator relationships. Habitat loss presents another, with development consuming the rich deciduous woodlands these spring ephemerals require. Invasive species compound these pressures—in particular, garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), a plant native to Eurasia and northern Africa that competes for resources while releasing chemicals that suppress native plant growth.

For the gardener who cultivates awareness alongside plants, hepatica, and rue anemone become worthy of attention not for their garish displays but for their quiet persistence. They remind us that beauty often resides in subtle details rather than bold statements, in fleeting moments rather than permanent monuments. The presence of hepaticas in woodlands across continents—from Baltic forests to Japanese mountains to the northeastern woodland—suggests that we can better transcend cultural differences not by importing plants from far away, with all the woes they bring, but by embracing the gardens of our own place, wherever it may be.

¹. Jack Sanders, *the Secrets of Wildflowers* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2014), 9. ↩

². Andy Byfield, “Japanese Hepaticas: Pastel Perfection,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/gardening-blog/2015/apr/09/japanese-hepaticas-pastel-perfection> and Gunther Kleinhans, “Yukiwariso: Small Jewels from Japan,” *Pacific Horticulture*, <https://pacifichorticulture.org/articles/hepaticas-small-jewels-from-japan>. ↩