THE Painted Trillium is not the commonest species of trillium to be found in Virginia. It must be sought out in the mountain counties where it grows in strongly acid soil, near bogs and hemlock forests. It is well worth the seeking, however, for in my opinion it is the loveliest of all the trilliums. The petals are about an inch long, white, with slightly wavy edges. At the base of each petal is a characteristic inverted red V from which a faint red flush spreads up into the veins of the flower.

The trilliums are usually included with the lily family, although in some classifications they are accorded a family of their own. They are monocotyledonous plants, and the parts of the flower are arranged in threes or multiples of three, 3 sepals, petals, stigmas and carpels and 6 stamens. From this feature, of course, comes the name, trillium. As the flower opens, the mature stigmas are revealed first, close to the receptacle, whereas the anthers are still closed. This is usually an encouragement for cross-pollination to occur. However, the flower stays open and fresh for quite a while (as is often the case in plants which produce only one flower a year) during which time the anthers mature so that self-pollination could also occur.

As with many well-known wild flowers the trilliums are inundated with common names, many of them confusing and misleading. They are referred to generally as the Wake-Robins, Birthroots or Benjamins and are also occasionally known as Trinity Flowers and Indian Pinks. Although it can be found under the names Striped Wake Robin and Painted Lady, Trillium undulatum is fairly universally referred to as the Painted Trillium and so it seems reasonable to call it by this name.

One of the characteristics of the Painted Trillium is its preference for very acid soil. It is the most difficult of all the trilliums to cultivate, partly because of this and partly because it likes soil which remains cool all the year round. Perhaps it might be appropriate to offer a word of discouragement to would-be transplanter, both to save them disappointment and to preserve the few populations of the species that we do have in the state. It is commoner in the north, found often quite high up in the mountains, but its range extends from Nova Scotia to Georgia and westward to Missouri and Wisconsin.

Unfortunately it is reportedly edible, though I cannot believe that it is very often eaten. My old book on the subject says: “The young, unfolding plants of Trilliums are eaten as greens by country people in Franklin County, Maine, under the name of ‘Much-hunger’; but on account of the scarcity and great beauty of the plants it is certainly to be hoped that, except in cases of ‘much hunger,’ they will not be gathered for food purposes.” (Let us indeed hope so). “Trillium roots are highly emetic,” (although I have also read that they could be used as a nerve tonic!), “Their berries are open to suspicion.”

Probably the best-known trillium is the Large-flowered or Great Trillium, Trillium grandiflorum. This species occurs in mountains and woods up and down the eastern United States, often growing in large colonies which present a magnificent display when all the large white flowers are just opening, in April or May.

The most infamous trillium is Trillium erectum, which has a large number of unflattering common names, Stinking Willie, Brown Beth, Nose-bleed, Bath Flower and Wet-dog Trillium. Despite these it is a pretty flower with deep purplish-red petals. It does have an unpleasant odor, supposed to resemble decaying flesh, and the smell, combined with its ‘carrión’ color, attracts the patronage of flies instead of the more customary bees and butterflies.

The Painted Trillium appeals to the more conventional visitors, bees and butterflies, and of course ourselves. This year the woods have been getting rather a late start, but it should be possible to find this pretty trillium blooming in its few Virginia localities through May.