Erythronium must have as varied a number of common names as any wildflower. The spots on the leaves of the plant provide reason enough for the names fawn-lily and trout-lily, but also the flower does bloom in trout-fishing season. Adder’s tongue perhaps describes the shape of the leaves, and there are two other serpentine names, snakeroot and rattlesnake violet. Dogtooth violet is another misleading name since the plant is not a violet; it is a lily, but the petals of many species are long and pointed rather like the canine teeth of dogs. Amberbell describes the shape and color of the flower of *E. americanum*.

The trout-lily is a beautiful flower with solitary bell-shaped blooms which hang downwards from long, slender, upright stems. As with all lilies, both petals and sepals are colored and petaloid, in this case all alike, bright yellow and strongly recurved. When sepals and petals are indistinguishable from each other, they are known collectively as tepals. In *E. americanum* there are six of these tepals curving away from six upright yellow stamens with bright brown anthers. The club-shaped pistil has its tips or stigmas united. The mottled liver-colored markings on the leaves are very characteristic of the trout-lily and make it quite easy to identify the plant in the woods when it is not in bloom.

The flowers close at night and remain partly so on dull or rainy days. They always face the sun and the tepals recurve to their fullest extent on the brightest and hottest days. Spring flowers almost seem to be “conscious” of exploiting the gradually improving weather conditions (*almost*, but not *quite!*).

In a large patch of trout-lilies there will be only relatively few blooms compared with the number of plants in the patch. The explanation for this lies in the curious life history of the species. The mature seed lies dormant on the forest floor from mid-summer, when it is shed from the plant, until the following spring. Then it germinates to form a tiny miniature corm which sends up only a single leaf, and no flower. The following season the little corm produces from one to three thin threads called *droppers*. These sometimes appear briefly above ground and then arch over and burrow straight down into the earth. Each dropper forms a new corm at its tip with the transfer of stored food from last season’s corm. The new corms can be over half a foot away from the original one and several inches deeper into the soil. Each one, again, only grows a single food-manufacturing leaf and no flowers.

This process may continue for up to four years, depending on soil conditions, so that there can be as many as 45 plants from the five seeds germinating in one year from a single flower. All of these plants will consist of a single leaf and no flowers and will be spread out over quite a wide area. This of course explains the large, flowerless patches of flowers so often found. Finally, when the corm has reached a good size, it no longer sends out droppers, but instead produces a single, complete plant with the elegant little flower that we know and admire.

This unusual procedure helps to ensure vigorous and healthy offspring, since a young plant at the start of its growth will have a large food reserve amassed by the parent. Another advantage one might point out a little ruefully is that the performance helps to protect the plant from predatory wild flower gatherers! All this “burrowing” embeds the corm deeper and deeper into the soil, so that by the time it is ready to produce a flower, it may be over a foot below the surface. To dig it up without damaging the long, fragile stalk which is growing out from it is an extremely difficult operation. One disadvantage of the life cycle is that it is relatively slow since fertile seeds are only produced once every four to five years. The trout-lily is found throughout the eastern United States from Canada down to Georgia and west to Minnesota, Nebraska and Arkansas. It always occurs in large colonies, usually in rich woods and thickets, but also in bottomland and meadows where the conditions are quite moist. Flowers can be found as early as March.

Unfortunately, like so many other members of the lily family, the trout-lily is edible. The leaves can be used as a potherb, and the corm, if it is finally retrieved, is quite sweet and was much relished as a tibbit by the Indians. It has also been used as a medicine; substantial amounts of the leaves and roots are reported to be emetic.