EVERYONE is familiar with the traditional trousers of the men of the Netherlands, and so, when we meet a flower that is called after them, we ought to know what to expect. The flowers of Dutchman’s breeches have a characteristic shape which does indeed resemble a miniature pair of inverted baggy pantaloons such as are still sometimes worn by Dutch men. The two leg-like spurs are, in fact, two of the four, greenish-white petals. The other two are much smaller and narrower, and point downwards with their hollowed tips extended to form an arch over the six protruding yellow stamens. The green style is very slender and tipped with a two-lobed stigma.

The scientific name of the plant is *Dicentra Cucullaria*. *Dicentra* means ‘two-spurred’ and applies to the two larger petals and *Cucullaria* comes from the Latin word for ‘hood’ and refers to the two smaller petals. The flower belongs to the fumitory family, Fumariaceae which includes fumitory, Corydalis, squirrel corn and bleeding heart, and is sometimes merely given sub-family status within the poppy family (Papaveraceae).

Dutchman’s breeches is one of the prettiest of our early spring flowers, but it is unfortunately not all that common in this state. It is primarily a flower of the northeastern U.S., extending from Nova Scotia only down to North Carolina so that by the time it gets to Virginia it is nearing the southern limits of its range. However, scattered groups can be found in rich, open woods, and each group may contain a large number of plants which extend over a wide area. It is just a pity for those of us who are admirers of this delicate little plant that the groups themselves are so few and far between. Dutchman’s breeches flowers at the end of March, if the spring is fairly well advanced; otherwise, in April and on into May in some places. The flowers are fragile, bloom for a short time, and will not stand being picked and brought into the house.

The flower stalks rise several inches above the clumps of bluish-green, heavily-dissected, compound leaves. The flowers hang down in a line at the tips of these stalks. There may be from one to nine flowers on each stalk. The root consists of a number of small tubers, closely clustered together giving the appearance of a scaly bulb. These are often reddish in color, particularly when they are exposed by a heavy rain or other erosion on the surface of the ground. A related species, *D. canadensis*, is called squirrel corn because its roots are supposed to be very tasty food for squirrels. But beware of trying any species of *Dicentra* for yourselves. They all contain poisonous alkaloids in varying quantities throughout the parts of the plant, and have been known to cause serious disorders in cattle such as trembling, staggering, labored breathing and convulsions.

Dutchman’s breeches can be transplanted quite easily since their tubers are so near the surface that they are easy to dig up whole. They will flower well if given a slightly sandy soil and a mixture of sun and shade. The best time for transplanting is probably in the spring, just after the flower has bloomed. Later on in the summer, the leaves turn yellow and wither.

The exotic shape of *Dicentra Cucullaria* has inspired all kinds of common names. The flowers are known variously as soldiers’ caps, white hearts, breeches flowers and lyre flowers. In addition to squirrel corn, *D. canadensis*, the other main species in the genus around here, *D. eximia*, is known as turkey corn, staggerweed and bleeding heart. There is another species, *D. spectabilis*, which is known as Chinaman’s breeches!

Best known common name for *D. Cucullaria* is Dutchman’s breeches. Unlike many other common names, it is hard to confuse with anything else. The only other common name that I know which involves someone from Holland is Dutchman’s pipe which is a very different plant, a shrubby vine called *Aristolochia* with flowers shaped like a strongly curved pipe.

Dutchman’s breeches is not quite the first wild flower to bring us the good news that winter is over. But it comes out hard on the heels of the really early messengers such as *Hepatica*, bloodroot, and spring-beauty, and may be found blooming with them in the latter part of this month if the spring is warm, even one. Clumps of this uniquely-shaped flower are easy to recognize.

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