Wild Ginger

Illustration by Lucile Walton

Some of the first leaves that we notice in the woods in spring are those of the wild ginger, Asarum canadense. The leaves are rather large, two to four inches across — sometimes even larger — heart-shaped, and a dark reddish-green. Both leaves and stalks are quite hairy. The flower is also out in early spring but is not nearly so conspicuous as the leaves. It is sometimes necessary to clear the leaf litter from around the plant to see it at all. There are no petals; the “bell” of the flower is formed by three pointed calyx lobes about a quarter of an inch long and a deep brownish-maroon.

When crushed, the leaves are aromatic and spicy ginger. Roots can be used fresh, dried, or boiled until tender and then cooked in a sugar syrup to make a rich candy.

Our wild ginger is no close relation to the commercial spice. The latter is a monocotyledon, Zingiber officinale, belonging to the Zingiberaceae and a native of Asia, although now cultivated widely throughout the tropics. Ginger was one of the earliest spices known to the Old World. It was mentioned by Confucius, and probably travelled to Europe in the camel trains of the Arab traders. It had certainly arrived in the southern part of Europe by the first century A.D., since its virtues and medicinal properties were extolled by the Greek physician Dioscorides, who lived and worked then. In addition to numerous culinary uses and some medicinal applications, the essential oil which could be extracted was used to add an “oriental” touch to scent. How exotic, to go out for dinner exquisitely dressed and smelling deliciously of ginger!

The smell of our wild ginger is quite similar, but not nearly so strong as that of Zingiber. Asarum is a dicotyledon belonging to the well-defined birthwort family or Aristolochiaceae. This family includes Dutchman’s pipe, a huge vine flowering in mid-summer in the Appalachians, and the much smaller Virginia snake root. Another wild ginger, heartleaf, Asarum virginicum — sometimes put into its own genus, Hexastylis — can be distinguished from Asarum canadense by its mottled maroon and white flowers and evergreen leaves which are completely devoid of hairs.

Asarum canadense is primarily a northeastern species but comes down the mountains into Virginia and North Carolina. It is a highly variable species and has been divided by some systematists into at least four varieties. It grows in rich woods and tends to like calcareous soil. The flowers may be out as early as March and the plant can be found in bloom through April and May. But the blooms must be earnestly searched for. They are easy to miss, although well worth a moment of admiration when they are found.