The Monkey Flower

It is anticipating slightly to start looking for the monkey flower in May. It does not usually start blooming until June and can subsequently be found in flower throughout the summer until September. Monkey flower likes wet places and is quite common, if not actually prolific, in marshes, bogs, wet meadows and along stream banks in the mountains and upper Piedmont.

The reason for the name is an easy one this time. The flower has the appearance of a rather wry, wrinkled little face, and the generic name Mimulus comes from the Latin word for buffoon, 'mimus.'

Mimulus ringens, sometimes known as the Allegheny monkey flower, is a glabrous or smooth perennial which grows about three to four feet high with a square, unwinged stem. The leaves are opposite and sessile, that is, they have no stalks of their own, and they are elliptical to ovate in shape, with long pointed tips and slightly toothed edges. Flowers are borne singly in the axils of the leaves on rather long flower stalks. Each flower is about an inch long, tubular with five unequal lobes contained in two well-defined lips. The upper lip is erect and consists of two lobes, while the lower lip includes the other three lobes.

The blooms are nearly always purple, although a white variety is occasionally found. Two yellow spots on the lower lip lead to a white throat, the entrance to which is almost closed by the palate. All these 'facial' terms, of course, give further credence to the name monkey flower. There is a two-lobed stigma surmounting the ovary in which will eventually develop numerous seeds. M. ringens is widely distributed throughout the Northeast, extending from southern Canada down to Georgia.

A closely related species, the sharp-winged monkey flower, Mimulus alatus, has a slightly more southerly distribution. It is not found in Canada, but reaches down into northern Florida in places. Since both species occur in our area, it is comforting that they can be distinguished by several rather simple characteristics. The square stem of M. alatus has definite wings along the angles — hence the common name. The leaves have their own stalks in contrast to the stalkless leaves mentioned earlier, and the stalks of the flowers are much shorter than those of M. ringens.

All monkey flowers belong to the Scrophulariaceae, the figwort or snapdragon family. When I was a child in England, my botanical education was conducted by my mother as she worked in her flower garden. I learned the Scrophulariaceae as the "open-mouth-shut-mouth" family because if you pressed on the sides of her garden Antirrhinum (snapdragon) flowers, you could make their "mouths" open and close. Actually you can do this with Mimulus too, although the flower is considerably more delicate. And I believe I get more pleasure nowadays out of simply admiring the flowers as they grow!