



BWSR Featured Plant

Name: Virginia Waterleaf (*Hydrophyllum virginianum*)

Plant Family: Borage (Boraginaceae)

Statewide Wetland Indicator Status:

- FAC



Virginia Waterleaf growing in rich woods

With attractive flowers and unique leaf patterns, Virginia Waterleaf is a stunning component of the woodland understory. This early blooming species grows 12-20" tall in partial to dense shade in moist woods and floodplain forests. Its elegant flowers provide important early season sources of pollen and nectar for pollinators. The plant's ability to tolerate disturbance, establish quickly and thrive along within a diversity of other woodland flowers makes it well suited for restoring woodland understory cover.



Clusters of tubular flowers

Identification

Pale violet, pinkish or white flowers are born in loose clusters from May to June. The tubular flowers are about 1/2 inch long, and have long stamens. Leaves are deeply divided into 3, 5 or 7 lobes with coarse teeth. Mature leaves are six inches long and four inches wide and may be slightly hairy. The leaves commonly have a water stained appearance that can fade with age. The main stem is purplish where the leaves attach and may have flattened hairs on the stem. *Hydrophyllum* was formerly placed in the Hydrophyllaceae (Waterleaf) family but is now considered part of the Boraginaceae (Borage) family.



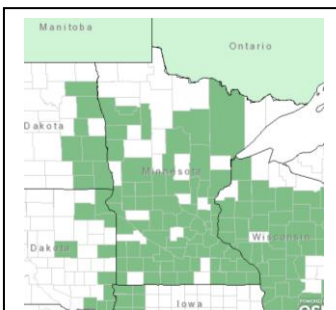
Leaf with light spots. Photo by Heather Holms

Range

Virginia waterleaf occurs in forested pockets of the western Dakotas and extends east into deciduous woodlands and savannas. This wildflower grows best in partial shade on rich moist soils and can also thrive in areas with some disturbance such as along pathways and woodland clearings. Garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*) invasions can have a negative impact on Virginia waterleaf populations.

Primary Uses:

- Forest floor restoration
- Pollinator food
- Medicinal



Range based on University of MN Herbarium data.

Uses

Tender young leaves are mild-tasting and make a pleasant addition to salads. More mature leaves are also edible but become bitter with age. Tea made from the roots is an astringent used in the treatment of diarrhea and dysentery. A decoction, or the chewed root, has been used as a treatment for cracked lips and sore mouths.

At least two specialist pollinators use Virginia waterleaf, the waterleaf cuckoo bee (*Nomanda hydrophylli*) and Andrena bees (*Andrena geranii*). Flower nectar and pollen attract many other types of bees including bumblebees, long-horned bees (*Synhalonia spp.*), mason bees (*Osmia spp.*), Halictid bees (*Lasioglossum spp.*, *Augochlorella spp.*, etc.), Andrenid bees (*Andrena spp.*), and bee flies (Bombyliidae). The foliage is occasionally browsed by White-tailed deer, but does not seem to be a preferred food. The species can be used to establish cover on bare areas, such as woodland openings after buckthorn removal. It may not be ideal for some small woodland gardens due to its ability to spread.



Andrena bee on waterleaf
Photo by Angella Moorehouse

Planting Recommendations

Virginia waterleaf is easily propagated by seed and by dividing clumps. Its seeds can be spread after they ripen in late spring. The seeds require a period of cold, moist conditions so they won't germinate until the following spring (purchased seed is often spread in late fall). Plants can be divided shortly after they emerge in the spring or in the fall when they are dormant.

Planting Methods

- Seed
- Plant division
- Containerized Plants

Similar Species

Virginia waterleaf may be confused with wild sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicaulis*) or wood anemone (*Anemone quinquefolia*) as they grow in similar habitats. However, wild sarsaparilla has 5 leaflets and greenish flowers, and wood anemone has white flowers and leaves that are arranged in whorls compared to the relatively large and deeply divided leaves of Virginia Waterleaf.



Wild sarsaparilla



Wood anemone

References

<https://www.minnesotawildflowers.info>, <http://www.restoringthelandscape.com>, <http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org>, <http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info>, <https://www.nps.gov/miss/learn/nature/virginiawaterleaf.htm>, <http://practicalplants.org/wiki>, Holm, Heather, *Pollinators of Native Plants: Attract, Observe and Identify Pollinators and Beneficial Insects with Native Plants*. Minnetonka, MN: Pollination Press LLC, 2014.