



JAMES JOHNSTON

Trillium Glory

Oregon's old growth flower on the forest floor

Oregon's state tree is the Douglas fir, which forms the overstory of cathedral ancient forest in the unlogged slopes of the Coast and Cascade Ranges. Our state flower is the Oregon grape, a common shrub in the understory of Douglas fir old growth. Oregon grape doesn't really have much of a flower, though. The plastic-y leaves do sprout small dim yellow bulbs for a short time in the spring, but let's face it,

you've probably never picked Oregon grape flowers for a bouquet.

A far better choice for our state flower, in my humble opinion, would have been the supremely lovely trillium, whose marvelously symmetrical leaves and brilliant pedals are also closely associated with old growth forests. In the spring, the sheer white flower draws the eye from the big trees to the complex textures of the forest floor.

The name trillium refers to the patterns of three in the structure of this plant. Our local species, *Trillium ovatum*, can be recognized by three large white petals, three sepals (small green leaves behind the petals) and three large green leaves. The flower is separated from the leaves by a long, delicate stem. The petals turn pinkish as they age.

populations of trilliums are found in forests that are hundreds of years old.

Native peoples mixed the flowers into salads and used them to treat a variety of ailments, including gangrene. Trilliums have an interesting life cycle: By midsummer, the flower produces a ridged berry-like seed covered in a sticky surface called an elaiosome.

Trilliums thrive in the damp, moist, shaded understory of an old-growth forest.

Most people believe that trilliums are very sensitive to human disturbance and that if you pick a trillium it will never grow back from that spot. It's not necessarily true: The shade-grown trillium does take many years to produce fertile seeds, and if the leaves are removed it will take several years at least for new leaves to store enough sugars in the rhizomes (roots) for the plant to regenerate itself. It is best to enjoy this flower on the stem. They are, unfortunately, very difficult to transplant from the woods to your garden.

Trilliums thrive in the damp, moist, shaded understory of an old-growth forest. Here, they're provided with lots of nitrogen by the complex lichen systems that develop in older forests. They are often found alongside other nitrogen-loving plants including oxalis, vanilla leaf, twisted stalk, sweet-scented bedstraw, sword fern and three-leafed foam flower. Trilliums, along with hundreds of other species, are displaced by clearcutting of old growth, and the largest

The elaiosome attracts ants, which carry the seeds to their nest, eat the sticky outer surface and deposit the seeds in a trash heap, where they germinate and sprout.

There is a fierce debate between botanists who believe trilliums are a type of lily and radical separatists who believe that the netted vein leaves of the trillium distinguish it from lilies and justify the creation of a new family.

Any of the hikes featured on the excellent foldout map "Fifty Old-Growth Hikes in the Willamette National Forest" (available from the Forest Service office on East 7th Ave.) will take you to extensive trillium beds starting in late March. Some of my favorite spots to visit for trilliums are the PAWN trail on the North Fork of the Siuslaw River west of Florence, the Fall Creek Trail east of Lowell, the McKenzie River Trail and the Brice Creek Trail east of Cottage Grove. You can find detailed directions to all these hikes by searching the on-line archives of the *EW*.

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