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# Spring Beauty

## *Claytonia lanceolata*

By Robin Patten

While trekking across Montana's high country in late spring, I often come across subalpine meadows worked over by an animal with strong claws. Ragged furrows scar the ground, with clumps of dirt scattered wildly about. Tattered white petals and bits of bulb-like plant material are other clues that a grizzly bear was harvesting nutritious flowering plants called spring beauties.

### Identification

Spring beauty is a common early spring wildflower. The small 2- to 6-inch-tall perennial herb is easy to overlook when just a few have emerged. But when large numbers begin blooming, they can turn an entire meadow white with blossoms. The spring beauty in bloom is fairly easy to identify: a roughly dime-sized flower of five white petals, notched at the tip and delicately marked with

pink veins, and five conspicuous stamens. A pair of narrow, lance-shaped leaves sits just below the cluster of blossoms. Underground is the plant's "corm," a spherical portion of the stem about the size of a marble.

### Range and flowering season

Spring beauty grows throughout the Rocky Mountain region from sagebrush foothills to alpine meadows, usually in open areas that have moist soils. The plant blooms shortly after snowmelt, which ranges from April to midsummer depending on elevation and latitude.

### Wildlife value

The spring beauty's carbohydrate-rich corm is an important food for black and grizzly bears and burrowing rodents. Kevin Frey, FWP bear biologist in Bozeman, says spring beauty is part of the grizzly's spring diet along with Cous biscuitroot, cow parsnip, glacier lily, and licorice root. Using their long front claws and powerful shoulder muscles, grizzlies rototill fields of

spring beauty to harvest the nutritious stem. Because harvesting such tiny food items can burn up more calories than it yields, Frey says grizzlies often raid underground chambers where pocket gophers and other rodents sometimes store hundreds of corms.

### Scientific name

*Claytonia* comes from the 18th-century English naturalist John Clayton, while *lanceolata* refers to the plant's narrow, lance-shaped leaves.

### Human use

Humans have long fed on the spring beauty's corm and vitamin C-rich leaves. Native Americans dug corms in spring after the plants flowered to supplement their diet. Because spring beauty corms are high in starch and digestible sugar, they can be eaten raw and are occasionally gathered by early season backpackers to supplement trail meals. The ones I've tried tasted something like a cross between a mellow radish and a raw potato. Dubbed "Indian potatoes" by early settlers, corms can also be baked, steamed, dried and ground into a flour for cakes, or stored overwinter. 🐻

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