

# NATIVES TO KNOW

## Twinleaf, *Jeffersonia diphylla*

by Ruth Oldenburg

One of the things I look forward to after Winter is the blooming of my favorite Spring ephemeral, *Jeffersonia diphylla*. This uncommon plant is known as Twinleaf, as its dark green basal leaves are divided into symmetrical lobes that look as if they are two separate leaves. Its stems are thin and wiry, and its showy, white flowers look very similar to those of Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) although they are not in the same family.

Twinleaf blooms in April, but I have to keep watch often to be able to see it in bloom. Its flowers are fleeting—a strong wind or a hard rain can knock the flowers right off from their leafless stalks. I enjoy the unusual leaves

of this unique plant until Fall when the plant starts to die back. The cup-shaped flowers have 8 petals and yellow stamens. After the petals drop, the leaves fully open and green fruit forms as a roughly pear-shaped capsule that may be hidden under the leaves. When the capsule is dry, its hinged lid opens up like a little trash bin to reveal the shiny, light brown seeds that are dispersed by ants. The seeds remind me of tiny un-popped popcorn kernels.



Photo by Ruth Oldenburg



It is best to plant Twinleaf in moist, rich, limestone soils under deciduous trees. But plant it near a path or somewhere you are able to see the flowers up close. I have it in my yard at the woodland edge under tall trees. It should be planted where it will be in part sun in early Spring and a shady spot in the hot Summer months. It is tolerant of full shade. Twinleaf grows from 8 inches to 18 inches tall and forms clumps.

Native Twinleaf is uncommonly found from New York to Wisconsin, south to Alabama and Virginia, (zone 5–6). The plant genus *Jeffersonia* is in the barberry family (*Berberidaceae*) with only one species in North America (one other *J. dubia*, in Japan). Please do not collect Twinleaf in the wild, and make sure those you purchase have been nursery propagated.

It is slow to mature and may take several years to flower. Be patient and you will be rewarded! My mature plants produce a few seedlings each year which I give away to friends. Each Spring, I receive nice comments from many of them about the progress and flowering of their Twinleaf. It is nice to know that my plants bring a little bit of joy to others.

Botanical drawing from the journal *Addisonia: colored illustrations and popular descriptions of plants*

Eaton, Mary E., New York Botanical Garden, 1916-[1964] v. 5 1920, PLATE 176

<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/91695>

Holding Institution: Missouri Botanical Garden, Peter H. Raven Library

## A Bit of History

The genus name *Jeffersonia* name honors President Thomas Jefferson, who was a farmer and a horticulturist.

*The study of botany, which Jefferson considered among “the most valuable of the sciences,” served as another foundation for his interests in gardening and landscape design. His excursion through New England and upstate New York with James Madison in 1791 was primarily a botanical ramble, and the following year a woodland wildflower, Jeffersonia diphylla, or Twinleaf, was named in his honor by Benjamin Smith Barton, the most prominent botanist in America. At a meeting of the American Philosophical Society in 1792, Barton proclaimed that Jefferson’s “knowledge of natural history... especially in botany and in zoology... is equaled by that of few persons in the United States.” Jefferson appraised native plants for their usefulness....”*

Hatch, P. *Thomas Jefferson and Gardening*. (2016, October 26). In Encyclopedia Virginia.

Retrieved from [http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Jefferson\\_Thomas\\_and\\_Gardening](http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Jefferson_Thomas_and_Gardening).

Illustration: SDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Britton, N.L., and A. Brown. 1913. *Illustrated Flora of the Northern States and Canada*. Vol. 2: 129.



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