

White Avens

Geum canadense

By Linda Shuster, WORC Board Member-at-Large

I have been digging up what I thought was a non-native weed growing in my yard, although I was unable to identify it. One day I found a blooming herbaceous plant I did not recognize, and I was able to identify it from the flower as *Geum canadense* or White avens. I subsequently discovered that the 'weed' I had been pulling was what the plant looks like when it first emerges from the ground in the spring.

White avens is a perennial herbaceous plant. It is a member of the Rose or *Rosaceae* family. White avens is widely distributed throughout the eastern two-thirds of the U.S. and most of eastern Canada. According to the University of Michigan Herbarium, it has been found in nearly every county in Michigan in both the Upper and Lower Peninsulas. It is



[Cauline leaves](#)

typically found in rich forests and moist environments, such as in swamps and along streams, but it also can be found in drier oak-hickory forests. White avens grows to a height of about 1 1/2-2 1/2'. It has both basal leaves, which are produced in the spring, and alternating cauline leaves (leaves growing from the stem), which are produced later in the growing season. The basal leaves are produced in a rosette formed by long stalks with 3-7 compound leaflets. They are coarsely toothed, and they are gone by the time the plant begins to flower. The stem or cauline leaves are compound and typically trifoliate on the lower stem and simple on the upper stem. The stem leaves are more finely toothed than the basal leaves. The University of Michigan Herbarium notes however, that *Geum canadense* is more variable than other species in the genus.

The flowers of White avens are white, approximately 1/2" across, and have five petals. The plant blooms for 1-2 months in the summer. The fruit has hooked tips that allow the seeds to attach to animals (or human clothing) for dispersal. The seeds can be collected, but must be cold stratified prior to planting. White avens also can be propagated from its rhizomes. It prefers light shade or partial sun, and it can



White avens rosette
Photo by Linda Shuster



White avens flower
Photo by Linda Shuster

become weedy in the right conditions; however, when it forms into masses, the North Carolina State University Extension website notes that it can be used as a lawn alternative and can be mowed.

White avens flowers attract a variety of insects, including wasps, bees, beetles, and flies. These insects suck the nectar. In addition, some bees collect the pollen, while Syrphid flies feed on it. Aphids feed on the foliage, and the larvae of a moth, *Tinagma obscurolfasciella*, mine the leaves. It is not typically eaten by white-tailed deer. According to the Native Plant Trust's Go Botany website, the Iroquois used the plant to make a love potion.

In summary, White avens is not a showy plant, but it produces pretty little flowers for several months in the summer in partial shade or partial sun. The foliage is attractive and can remain green over the winter. It is beneficial for a variety of insects. Additional excellent photos of the plant can be found on the website of the [Arkansas Native Plant Society](#).

Sources

Native Plant Trust Go Botany: <https://gobotany.nativeplanttrust.org/species/geum/canadense/>

University of Michigan Herbarium: <https://michiganflora.net/species.aspx?id=2485>

Hilty, J. Illinois Wildflowers:

https://illinoiswildflowers.info/savanna/plants/white_avens.htm

Image Sources:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Geum_canadense_2017-05-23_0714.jpg

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