

Ramps

Allium tricoccum

By Linda Shuster, WORC member

Allium tricoccum goes by many common names, including ramps, ramp, ramson, wild leek, wood leek, spring onion, and wild garlic. Ramps belong to the onion (Alliaceae) family. It is a native herbaceous perennial that is harvested as food.

Ramps are found in nearly all Michigan counties in rich deciduous forests, particularly moist areas in stands of beech, maple, and hemlock. Their leaves, which first appear in May, look similar to those of lily-of-the-valley. However, they are easily recognized



Ramps flowers with turkey tail mushrooms, McLean County, IL
Photo by Linda Shuster

by the red tinge of the base of the leaves. In addition, the leaves give off an onion-like smell when they

are torn. Ramps are usually found growing with other spring ephemerals, including trillium, trout lily, and bloodroot. They are often found in large colonies. According the University of Wisconsin Horticulture website, indigenous peoples living in the area around the southern part of Lake Michigan called these dense colonies of ramps "CicagaWuni" or "shikako," hence the name Chicago.



Ramps growing with trillium and trout lily in Lepard Park, Grand Rapids
Photo by Bill Wonderlin

Ramps grow from a bulb which looks similar to that of a scallion. It is the natural offsetting or splitting of the bulbs that produces the large colonies of plants. Each bulb sends up 2-3 smooth green leaves. The leaves are initially furled, but expand and open up into a blade-shaped leaf. The leaves grow to a height of around 8", and begin to die back as the trees leaf out. The flowers emerge at or around the time the leaves die back and bloom from June through July. They are small round clusters of white flowers which have six petals, six stamens with yellow tips, and a green ovary.

Ramps are celebrated at many festivals in the Appalachian mountains and other areas. Harvesting for these festivals, as well as for use in restaurants, has led to an unsustainable loss of ramps in some areas. All parts of the plant are edible. They can be used in any recipe that calls

for onions or leeks. However, they are very versatile. For example, they can be eaten raw in salads, cooked by wilting or grilling, and they can be pickled. Harvesting the entire plant is the most aggressive form of harvesting. A more sustainable approach is to cut the plant off just above the bulb. The University of Wisconsin Horticulture website recommends that ramps be planted with other species, such as wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) or black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*), to fill in for the loss of the ramps after dieback. In addition to their culinary use, ramps' flowers attract pollinators, including a variety of bees.

In summary, ramps is an edible native plant that produces pretty white flowers in the early summer. It looks lovely in the spring when it grows in colonies. Like many spring ephemerals, it will leave a gap when it dies back, so it is recommended that it be planted with other plants that will fill in when the ramps have disappeared.

Sources

University of Wisconsin Horticulture: <https://hort.extension.wisc.edu/articles/ramps-allium-tricoccum/>

University of Michigan Herbarium: <https://michiganflora.net/species.aspx?id=45>

North Carolina State University Extension: <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/cultivation-of-ramps-allium-tricoccum-and-a-burdickii>

United Plant Savers <https://unitedplantsavers.org/ramps-cultivation-growing-guide/>