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Reprinted from the
Wild Ones Journal,
July/Aug 2006 issue.

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Measuring Mayapples

By Barbara Bray



The mayapple. Photo: Wendy VanDyk Evans,
www.forestryimages.org.

Children like riddles. One day in late March I enticed my daughter to come outside with me. We walked across the grass to the small trail heading under the maple and pine trees in our yard. We stopped for a moment and I asked her if she could see the wildflowers. She gazed at the decomposing fallen leaves on the ground and responded that all she could see were dead plants.

I took her by the hand and led her off my trail and we squatted down by some sticks poking up out of the ground. The sticks marked a special spot. Using my hands, I gently pulled back the layer of dead leaves and pine needles to expose the ground's surface. When I asked her again if she saw anything, she still saw nothing.



Mayapples spreading through the woods. Photo: David
Stephens, www.forestryimages.org.

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Then she noticed several small white pegs barely sticking up from the dirt. She pointed at them and asked what they were. Imagine her surprise when I told her that they were mayapples. How could these small pegs be mayapples? The leaves, stems, and flowers weren't even there. Touching the top of the pegs with our finger tips, we discovered that the pegs were sharply pointed.

Two weeks later, on a sunny morning in early April, with temperatures flirting with the 60 degree mark, Brenna and I revisited the mayapples. The whitish pegs were still there, but they had split open slightly to reveal something greenish gray inside. This new inner growth was quite soft. Brenna guessed it might be a folded-up leaf, but she wasn't quite sure. We talked about how it might be much easier for the plant to use a sharp point to push up through the soil. The stiff pointed peg, or sheath, protects the delicate stem and leaves. It would be almost impossible for the soft leaves to push up through the heavy dirt by themselves. What a great plant adaptation!



Mayapple flower. Photo: William M. Ciesla, Forest Health Management International, www.forestryimages.org.

As I write this in early May, the weather warms, and the mayapples continue to rise out of their protective sheaths. At first, the green, umbrella-like leaves are tightly furled around the stems. The mayapples look a little bit like skinny green mushrooms at this stage. Touch the leaves and they feel moist. If you look closely at the leaf edges, you will see they are pubescent. Within a couple of days, however, the furled leaves open, and soon are shading the ground around them. This is a plant you can almost see growing. On very warm days, the mayapples may grow anywhere from 1/2-inch to two inches in height. On cooler days they slow down a bit.

My daughter and I head back into the house, content to know that the mayapples are growing even if we can't watch them every minute of the day. Soon they will flower and we will walk down the trail again to peek under their leaves. Will all our mayapples flower, or will only a few? We will just have to wait and see.

Barbara Bray is president of the Oakland (MI) Chapter