Community Greenways Collaborative

The New York Phenology Project

USA npn National Phenology Network

Common name: **Red Trillium** Genus Species: ***Trillium erectum***

*Photo credit: Charles T. Bryson*
*USDA Agricultural Research Service, Bugwood.org*

***Description:*** Red trillium is a perennial herbaceous plant growing 6 inches to 2 feet tall. Several plants may be connected by creeping underground stems. Its dark reddish-brown, maroon, purple, white, or occasionally pale yellow flowers occur singly on a plant and have both male and female parts.

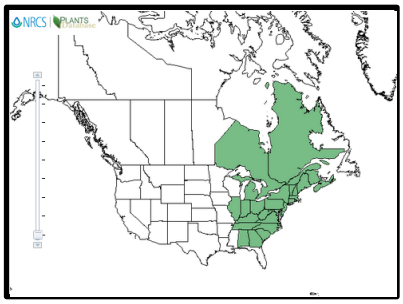
***Habitats:*** Red trillium grows in rich soil in damp, shady woods, primarily in moderately moist, broad-leaved, deciduous forests.

***Phenology highlights:*** Red trillium begins flowering at about 7 years of age and can have a fetid odor, hence the common name of stinking Benjamin.

## *Species facts*

- The foul smell of red trillium flowers attracts carrion flies that act as pollinators.
- Native Americans used the whole plant to make a poultice to treat tumors and inflammation.
- Early herbalists used this ill-scented plant to treat gangrene, based on the belief that plants were used to cure the ailments they resembled.
- Although red trillium was used medicinally, its fruits, seeds, and rhizomes are generally considered to be poisonous if ingested.

*Photo credit: William M. Ciesla*
*Forest Health Management International, Bugwood.org*



***Why observe this species?*** Red trillium is a USA-NPN regional plant species. Regional species are ecologically or economically important but are distributed more locally than calibration species. The NPN integrates these observations to understand better plant responses within the different geographic regions of the nation.

***Tip for observing this species:*** If drought seems to be the cause of leaf senescence for a plant, please make a comment about it for that observation.

*Map credit:* USDA, NRCS. 2014. The PLANTS Database http://plants.usda.gov, 25 August 2014. National Plant Data Team, Greensboro, NC 27401-4901 USA

For more information about phenology and the New York Phenology Project (NYPP), please visit the NYPP website (www.nyphenology.org) and the USA-NPN website (www.usanpn.org)

# Red Trillium (*Trillium erectum*)

***Note**: flower and fruit phenophases are nested so you may need to record more than one phenophase for each; for example, if you record **Y** for "open flowers" you should also record **Y** for "flowers or flower buds."*

Photo credit

***Initial growth*** New growth is visible after a period of no growth. Growth is "initial" until the first leaf has fully unfolded. For seedlings, "initial" growth includes the presence of one small leaf (cotyledon) before the first true leaf unfolds.


***Leaves*** One or more live fully unfolded leaves are visible. For seedlings, consider only true leaves and not the one small leaf (cotyledon) that is found on the stem shortly after the seedling germinates. Do not include dried or dead leaves.


***Flowers or flower buds*** One or more fresh open or unopened flowers or flower buds are visible on the plant. Include flower buds that are still developing, but do not include wilted or dried flowers.


***Open flowers*** One or more open fresh flowers are visible. Flowers are "open" when the reproductive parts (male stamens or female pistils) are visible between open flower parts. Do not include wilted or dried flowers.


***Fruits*** One or more fruits are visible on the plant. For red trillium, the fruit is a fleshy capsule that changes from green to red or purple and drops from the plant.

Photo credit

***Ripe fruits*** One or more ripe fruits are visible on the plant. For red trillium, a fruit is considered ripe when it has turned red or purple and readily drops from the plant when touched.

Photo credit

***Recent fruits or seed drop*** One or more mature fruits or seeds have dropped or been removed since your last visit. Do not include immature fruits that have dropped before ripening or old empty fruits.


***Aroma of Rotting Meat*** Carrion flies and American carrion beetles (photo) are attracted to red trillium flowers because of two similarities to rotting meat: the deep red color and the putrid odor of decaying flesh. These insects feed on the flower's pollen.

*All phenophases pictured here.*