



# Watching Wildflowers DeSoto State Park: Alabama's Wildflower Destination

**DeSoto State Park and Lookout Mountain in northeast Alabama have long been known for their spectacular fall color but don't forget about the spring wildflowers.** A Jacksonville State University botanist once told me that because of the overlapping botanical regions in Northeast Alabama, Lookout Mountain could have as many as 900 species of blooming plants!

---

By Ken Thomas, Park Superintendent  
Botanical Descriptions and Photos by  
Brittney Hughes, Park Naturalist



Guided hikes are led each year on Wildflower Saturday (the first Saturday in May) at DeSoto State Park.

Unlike birds, wildflowers are stationary and much easier to “watch.” Hiking the trails at DeSoto State Park, which vary in degrees of difficulty, is the perfect way to watch wildflowers. The Azalea Cascade Boardwalk Trail offers the easiest access to the spring wildflowers, and offers an elevated view of the forest floor. The Yellow Trail, which parallels the West Fork of Little River, offers a more rugged and challenging hike. Trail maps are available at any of the information centers at DeSoto State Park.

One can find wildflowers blooming from March through October, but the majority of wildflowers bloom from the end of April to the beginning of May. Historically, mountain laurel and rhododendron bloom in the middle of May.

## Here are a few of the flowers you can see at DeSoto State Park during the spring:



### Catesby's Trillium

*Trillium catesbaei*

When I first transferred to DeSoto State Park in 1991, I knew DeSoto was known for its wildflowers and I set out to learn about them. An awesome photographer and friend of mine came to visit one spring. As we hiked along the Azalea Cascade Trail, we came across a Catesby's trillium. I made an unimpressed comment of my sighting but my friend went berserk with excitement. I tried to calm him down while wondering what the fuss was about. After all, Catesby's trilliums were not uncommon in this area. My friend proceeded to tell me that this particular trillium was rare and not found in too many places in Alabama. Because I

had learned to identify them at one of the best places to find them, I was unaware of their sparseness, but now I know.

The Catesby's trillium is named for Mark Catesby, an English naturalist, who first recorded the species during the 1700s.

**Plant Height:** 8 to 20 inches

**Leaf and Bloom Description:** All trilliums have leaves of three, as the genus name trillium comes from the Latin “trilix” meaning “triple.” The medium-green leaves with purple veins whorl around a center point connecting to the stalk. The bloom reflexes, or curves, backwards upon itself, leaving the bright yellow flower parts in plain sight. This trillium's bloom nods below the leaves, starting out pure white for a short time and then fading to pink.

**When to Look for Catesby's Trillium:**

Starts showing in mid April; usually blooms through the first of June.

**Where It Grows:** Moist soils on slopes and under a canopy of deciduous and evergreen trees.

**Pollinators:** These plants are pollinated by several flying insects such as butterflies, and moths. The seeds are usually spread by an ant, a process called myrmecochory. Trillium seeds have a fleshy organ called an elaiosome that attracts ants. The ants extract the seeds from the decaying ovary and take them to their nest, where they eat the fleshy parts and put the seeds in their garbage, where they can be protected until they germinate.



### Indian Cucumber Root

*Medeola virginiana*

For many years, I was the park naturalist at DeSoto. In this position, I spent a lot of time leading interpretive hikes for school groups and park guests. One stop was to show my fellow hikers Indian cucumber root. I have always liked wilderness survival and would always include that the small rhizomatic root was edible and was told it tasted like cucumbers. I was called on my comment one day and asked if it really did taste like a cucumber, so I put my money where my mouth was and tried it. (Picking, digging, or destroying of plants, or any other natural resource in an Alabama State Park is a finable offense. Knowing this, I figured I could get away with it for educational reasons.) I still don't know exactly what Indian cucumber root tastes like because I really didn't wash all the dirt off and ate it with the root.

Indian Cucumber Root was a food source for Native Americans, as the small root is edible and tastes like a raw cucumber; it was eaten raw or cooked with other foods.

**Plant Height:** 1 to 2 feet

**Leaf and Bloom Description:** Indian cucumber root's leaves whorl around the central stem, with two to three "stories," or levels of leaves along the stem. The yellowish bloom is usually inconspicuous, growing along the topmost level of the leaves. The black-blue fruit is usually more noticeable.

**When to Look for Indian Cucumber**

**Root:** Can be seen starting in mid April throughout the summer into the fall, when the foliage turns a dull red in color.

**Where It Grows:** Open woods; usually in large, dense colonies on moist banks and under deciduous trees.



## Elf Orpine

*Diamorpha smallii*

The many rock glades in the park create special habitats with equally special plants. Occurring on some of the rock glades is another one of my favorites, elf orpine.

This small endemic (meaning it is only found in select places) is one that can be easily overlooked, especially with all of the beautiful showy blooms out there. But, if you look down when you are walking across a seemingly dead rock glade, you will be amazed at the plant life to be found. Elf orpine is only found in six states in the southeast United States.

The species name of this plant honors American botanist John K. Small, while the common name refers to its tiny size.

**Plant Height:** Approximately 3 inches

**Leaf and Bloom Description:** Tiny succulent red leaves with white flowers

that bloom almost its entire lifetime. Elf orpine is water-retaining, meaning it stores water in its leaves, stems, and roots and can live in hot and dry conditions.

**When to Look for Elf Orpine:** April through mid May.

**Where it grows:** This plant is found on rock (typically granite and sandstone) outcrops in the Southeast. Elf orpine commonly grows in large, reddish "blobs" in natural rock depressions. Foliage appears in the rock depressions after the spring rains. Usually grows in only 1 to 3 inches of soil.

## Dwarf Iris

*Iris verna*

In early April, I always look for the dwarf iris. The complementary purple and gold stand out from the brown forest floor. It is against park rules and regulations to destroy deface or remove any native wild or domesticated tree, shrub, plant or wildflower. This regulation is necessary because we want everyone to enjoy our natural resources. On one occasion, I was with a fellow ranger, Tim Haney, on Little River Canyon when he noticed a man and woman coming out of the woods with a bucket and shovel – always a bad sign. Tim approached the couple and discovered that the man had dug up 13 dwarf crested irises under the direction of his girlfriend.

Tim did his duty and issued a citation to the man. Later the woman called one of the DeKalb County district attorneys and complained about her boyfriend's citation. Unknown to her was the fact that the assistant district attorney volunteered to lead wildflowers hikes at DeSoto State Park. Still not satisfied, the woman went to the top and called the judge, which didn't help either. In court, the man pled guilty and was fined the maximum of \$500. There are many lessons to be learned: don't pick or dig wildflowers in Alabama State Parks and do not scold the judge who sets your boyfriend's fine. An added note: I transplanted the dwarf irises and they eventually all died. Nobody won that day.

When there are no leaves on the trees and the forest seems barren, that is when you will see this plant. Dwarf iris creates a splash of color in the early spring, amid other early-blooming plants. The species name *verna* means "vernal of spring."

**Plant Height:** 2 to 6 inches

**Leaf and Bloom Description:** The strap-like leaves of dwarf iris are a bright green. The bloom can range in color from blue to the lightest purple.

**When to Look for Dwarf Iris:** Starting in March, blooms into April and starts fading in May.

**Where It Grows:** Usually grows on moist, acidic banks in large clumps; also prefers open woods.





## Pink Lady's Slipper

*Cypripedium acaule*

My most traumatic wildflower memory involves the rare white lady's slipper. A lot of discussion has occurred as to whether the white lady's slipper is a subspecies of the pink lady's slipper or just an albino version. Regardless, it is a breathtaking marvel of Mother Nature. Several white lady's slippers occur at DeSoto State Park and with the addition of the boardwalk trail in 1994, we could safely show people the flowers from the protection of the boardwalk. As the naturalist, I had to keep track of what was blooming and where it was in order to plan the annual Wildflower Saturday, which occurs the first Saturday in May. About a week before a Wildflower Saturday, I was cataloging wildflower blooms and locations in preparation of the next week's events when I learned, to my horror, that someone had dug up most of our white lady's slippers. It was a terrible discovery that someone would ruin the possibility to share such a beautiful bloom with others. Fortunately, there are still a few white lady's slippers in the park for visitors to enjoy.

All orchids have a symbiotic relationship between their roots and a variety of fungi named mycorrhiza. This fungus is needed in the soil for a seed to germinate and for a plant to photosynthesize as an adult.

**Plant Height:** 2 to 3 feet

**Leaf and Bloom Description:** These plants only have two leaves to a plant, which are dark green, somewhat leathery, and branch out from the center of the plant. A single flower stalk forms from the center of the leaves. The bloom is about 3 inches long and slipper-like, tightly closed except for a small opening in the front.

**When to Look for Lady's Slipper:** Late April through late May; starts blooming fully in warmer weather.

**Where they grow:** Dry, acidic soils under a thin canopy of deciduous or evergreen trees. Commonly found under pine trees.

**Pollinators:** Lady's slippers are pollinated by bees, but the plant relies on deceit, luring the bee into the pouch by scent and trapping it. It is forced to climb out of the back of the slipper, brushing by the female stigma and depositing pollen from the last flower visited before picking up a new packet of pollen as it squeezes out.

## Spring Blooming Plants at DeSoto

Blue-eyed Grass	<i>Sisyrinchium angustifolium</i>
Bluets	<i>Houstonia caerulea</i>
Catesby's Trillium	<i>Trillium catesbaei</i>
Catawba Rhododendron	<i>Rhododendron catawbiense</i>
Columbine	<i>Aquilegia canadensis</i>
Downy Serviceberry	<i>Amelanchier arborea</i>
Dwarf Iris	<i>Iris verna</i>
Elf Orpine	<i>Diamorpha smallii</i>
Flowering Dogwood	<i>Cornus florida</i>
Fringed Phacelia	<i>Phacelia fimbriata</i>
Indian Cucumber Root	<i>Medeola virginiana</i>
Jack-in-the-pulpit	<i>Arisaema triphyllum</i>
Mountain-laurel	<i>Kalmia latifolia</i>
Patridgeberry	<i>Mitchella repens</i>
Pink Lady's Slipper	<i>Cypripedium acaule</i>
Rue Anemone	<i>Thalictrum thalictroides</i>
Sweet Shrub	<i>Calycanthus floridus</i>
Strawberry bush	<i>Euonymus americanus</i>
Toadshade Trillium	<i>Trillium cuneatum</i>
Trout Lily	<i>Erythronium spp.</i>
White Fringetree	<i>Chionanthus virginicus</i>
Wild Azalea	<i>Rhododendron canescens</i>
Wild Geranium	<i>Geranium maculatum</i>

### For More Information

DeSoto State Park has many outdoor recreational opportunities: hiking, biking, camping, bird watching, wildflowers and fly fishing are a few activities. Even though wildflowers are mainly a springtime activity, DeSoto State Park has outdoor opportunities all year long.

#### DeSoto State Park

13883 County Road 89

Fort Payne, AL 35967

256-845-0051

[www.alapark.com/DeSotoResort](http://www.alapark.com/DeSotoResort)