



## Garden Tales

# Early signs of spring bring color

By Susan Yost

Early spring in Delaware is marked by subtle splashes of color. The trees along roads suddenly develop a soft red tinge, and there are polka dots of color on lawns and roadsides.

The reddish color seen in the canopy of forested areas is often from the tiny flowers on red maple trees (*Acer rubrum*), which are common in Delaware, especially in areas with wet soil.

We may not think about maples as having flowers, but these trees do have real, although very small, flowers with red petals and sepals (the leaf-like parts below the petals).

In the center of these flowers are the reproductive parts, which are also red: the pistils (female parts), and stamens (male, pollen-bearing parts). It's fun to watch the pistils slowly develop into the familiar winged maple fruits. Red maple may have separate male and female flowers.

A look at the grassy areas of lawns and roadsides reveals spots of different colors — bright blue, white, magenta and purple, among others. Often these bright colors are from non-native weedy wildflowers, which are nonetheless intriguing on close inspection (a magnifying glass can help!). Non-native weeds are often adapted to, and grow well in, disturbed habitats like lawns and roadsides.

Speedwell (*Veronica persica*) has bright blue flowers, each less than a half-inch wide; but a patch of these is colorful. A close look at a flower shows four petals, one of which is smaller than the other three and two stamens. It may have been named "speedwell" for its medicinal uses.

Even tinier are the white flowers of hoary bittercress (*Cardamine hirsuta*), a member of the mustard family. The divided leaves have a mustardy scent, and the four-petaled flowers are also typical of this family.

Magenta is provided by the star-like blossoms of storksbill (*Erodium cicutarium*). This member of the geranium family grows in low clusters hugging the ground. Look for the greenish fruit, and you'll see why this plant is called storksbill.



Submitted photo/Delaware State University

**A close look at the weedy wildflower speedwell (*Veronica persica*) reveals its subtle beauty.**

Another weedy wildflower prominent in early spring is purple deadnettle (*Lamium purpureum*). This member of the mint family has small pinkish-purple flowers crowded near the top of leafy stems about 6 inches tall. Although I pull these ubiquitous weeds out of my garden, it's still worth while taking a close look at the purple spots on the petals, and admiring the beauty of the tiny flowers.

Purple deadnettle, and its close relative, henbit (*Lamium amplexicaule*) are also useful for a botanical lesson about the typical characteristics of the mint family: opposite leaves, square stem, flowers with bilateral symmetry and scented leaves.

So, take some time now in early spring to look closely at some of the tiny flowers of our native maple trees, and weedy wildflowers, as their bright colors catch your eye.

*Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.*