

A Delightful and Durable Woodlander: Himalayan Mayapple

By Panayoti Kelaidis

Believe it or not, these two images of Himalayan mayapple* were taken a few days apart of the same species (albeit two different plants) in my garden. I think these pictures speak volumes about the enormous impact of light, and especially shade not just on our photography, but on the plants in our garden. The intense sunlight and dry air of Colorado (where I garden) amplifies these contrasts: there are canyons in our foothills where you can find yellow ladyslippers, wood lilies and oak fern** on cool north slopes, and on the sunny slopes opposite there may be ball cacti (*Pediocactus simpsonii*) and yuccas!

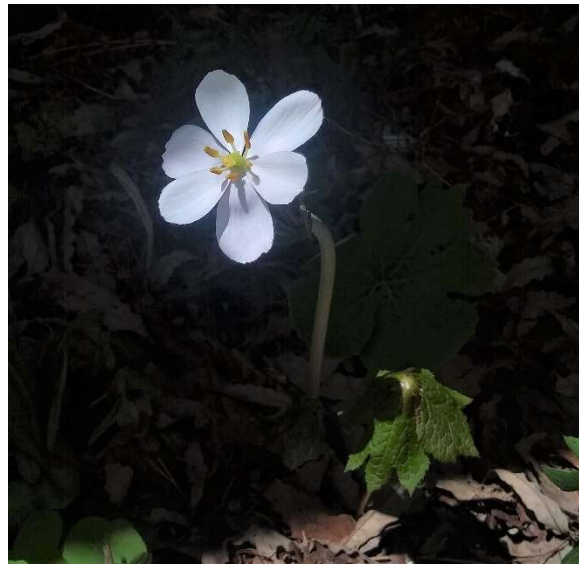


I have grown Himalayan mayapple for thirty years or more: few plants are so varied in their form from the time they emerge (often blooming) out of the ground to their bat-like phase unfurling their wing like leaves, and expanding them like an umbrella until the large, oblong red fruit ripens in early summer: more like a ballet than a mere flowering process!

It is a plant that has accrued a lot of lore: it is widely used in Traditional Chinese Medicine and possesses alkaloids utilized in Western Medicine to combat breast cancer. It seems to thrive most anywhere in a garden where you might grow classic woodlanders like wild ginger, dutchman's britches*** or most ferns.

We have found its many East Asian cousins (*P. pleianthum*, *P. versipelle*, *P. delavayi*: all of them also split into microgenera by busy body botanists!) less dependable—often succumbing to our late spring frosts.

I've found this pretty easily grown from seed—which is almost always available on the N.A.R.G.S. seed exchange (it will be this year for sure—I'm donating lots of seed from my plants!). It's also sold by better rare plant nurseries on the two coasts (my plants came from Far Reaches Farm, for instance).



This is but one of innumerable woodland treasures that are enriching our shady rock gardens: **do keep a lookout on the NARGS website for three Webinars this winter: the first will focus on shade loving plants-- organized by Bridget Wosczyzna-Briddes (who gardens in eastern Pennsylvania). It will feature cutting edge gardeners from across North America.**

Do check out this blog, which features a photo gallery of Himalayan mayapples in the wild and in cultivation: <http://prairiebreak.blogspot.com/2020/09/sinopodophyllum-hexandrum-var-yunnanense.html>

I have annotated some of the Latin names for plants I've referred to with common names above. I find cluttering text with too many scientific names distracting, especially when there are charming and widely recognized common names we can use. One can be too pedantic, you know!

* I prefer to stick to *Podophyllum hexandrum* to the "*Sinopodophyllum hexandrum*". I'm sure the botanist who split the genus had good reasons. Around 300 B.C. the Chinese Philosopher Gongsun Lung observed 白馬非馬: can one legitimately assert "a white horse is not a horse": I believe white horses ARE horses, and mayapples are mayapples, even if one grows in China and one in Ohio.

** *Cypripedium pubescens*, *Lilium philadelphicum* var. *andinum* and *Gymnocarpium disjunctum* for the rock gardeners who eschew common names.

*** *Asarum* spp., *Dicentra cucullaria*