

Hit the Trail, It's Time for Trilliums!

It's time to head for the hills, folks, put on your boots and go looking for the earliest signs of spring. As usual, the California poppies seem to be leading the pack, but we've also got pink flowering currants in bloom, and the buttercups are starting up too.

And it's trillium time. It's the plant of threes: three leaves, three petals, three sepals, three styles, three chambers in the fruit; I guess the six stamens kinda spoil the count. The Sausal Creek Watershed is lucky to have two kinds of trillium, the giant wakerobin, *Trillium chloropetalum*, just starting to bloom in late February, and the western trillium, *Trillium ovatum*, just coming up. Both of these trilliums are understory plants. In our watershed, they've been found under redwoods, oaks, and (gasp) a stand of nonnative elms.



Both trilliums tend to occur in colonies. This is possibly due to their symbiotic relationship with native ants. The trillium seeds have a lipid- and protein-rich attachment. The native ants carry the whole thing into the nest, eat the good parts, and dispose of the inedible seed in the ant compost pile, thereby planting the seeds underground with other organic material. Thank you ants!



The giant wakerobin grows 12 to 15 inches tall—first, a straight stiff stem, then three palm-sized leaves held perpendicular to the stem. Atop the stem are three tall, narrow petals ranging from white and various shades of pink and red to dark, almost purple reds.

Western trilliums are smaller, 10-12 inches tall, but share the same build. Their flowers always start out white then fade to pink. One difference is that western trilliums have a small stalk to connect the flower to the top of the stem, while the giant wakerobins are sessile, with the flower right atop the stem.

These plants take many years to grow. The photograph to the left shows four trillium youngsters next to the new spring leaves of a coastal black snakeroot. The trillium at the top is starting to really look like a trillium, with three leaves that have distinct veins. Just below it is a smaller, three-leaved plant, probably a year or two younger. Below that are two smaller leaves, one very small—trilliums start out with these slightly heart-shaped, single leaves. As this illustrates, if you've succeeded at the yearlong process to get trilliums to germinate, you still have several years to wait for them to be large enough to flower!

Places to look for giant wakerobins:

- Along Sequoia-Bayview Trail there are a few single plants here and there and an easily visible patch above the trail near the small tributary near the Big Trees Trail.
- You'll find one or two in the shade to the right of the Chaparral Trail as you head downhill, not too far from the top, just off-trail a few feet.
- Near the Montclair Railroad Trail: From Bishop Court, walk up the creek to the left of the trash gate; once you pass the small concrete structure, bear left, and look uphill. There, under the elms, is arguably the best batch of trilliums we've got.
- Another contender for best batch is in Beaconsfield Canyon, way to the back of the park, past the spot where the sewer line parallels the creek. The trail there predates FOSC's stewardship in the canyon; we never would have run a trail through the trillium patch, so watch your step! There was also a treefall there, which may have further damaged the trilliums.
- In Dimond Canyon, the only trilliums we've found are somewhere along the switchback where the Old Cañon Trail dips down to cross the creek. Many years ago I also saw some poking through ivy in another spot along the Old Cañon Trail, but I have not been able to find them recently.



The best spot to look for western trilliums is at the intersection of Fern Ravine Trail and Orchard Trail. As you cross Orchard Creek heading downhill, you'll see dozens of trilliums on the hill ahead of you. (Unfortunately, you also see a lot of veldt grass.) If you walk up Orchard Trail a short distance, you'll be able to see another large patch of trilliums across the creek. And there are a few others nearby. The spring of 2017 must have been a great year for this trillium site—there were dozens of blooms and many tiny seedlings. Several of the plants set seed.

The risks to the Sausal Creek Watershed's trilliums include:

- Loss of native ants to plant them. Even in Joaquin Miller Park, as far as one can get from urban areas in the watershed, Argentine ants are driving out the natives ants. Instead of plant-the-seeds symbiosis, the Argentine ants just pile on top of the cluster of ripe fruits, eat the yummy parts, and leave the seeds to dry and die.
- Invasives: Algerian ivy loves the same habitat. So does *Ehrharta erecta*, a.k.a. veldt grass.
- Collectors: Sadly, it happens here. Someone asked me for the location of the darkest-colored giant wakerobins we had, obviously intending to go dig them up. We've had other bulbs rustled in the watershed. Please, if you love them, leave them alone!

--Karen Paulsell

Note to trillium searchers: Please stay off the fragile hillside sites, keep a sharp eye out to avoid stepping on the immature leaves, and enjoy the beauty. But don't pick or dig!

Visit California Native Plant Exchange (<http://www.cnplx.info>) to find nurseries that sell specific species of natives.