

# MYSTERY SOLVED

## on Spring Creek

*Trautvetteria caroliniensis*

BARRY GLICK

**I DON'T KNOW...** call it good karma, dumb luck, or just plain ol' being in the right place at the right time, but just when my super-inflated ego takes control, I think

### ABSTRACT

*Trautvetteria caroliniensis* (Walt.) Vail (Ranunculaceae) is a gorgeous plant seldom grown in nurseries. Carolina bugbane, or tasselrue, has glossy, dark green, deeply lobed leaves and white flowers that appear over a long period, peaking in late June and mid July. Easily propagated from seeds, it grows best in light to moderate shade on moist, organic garden soils. Nursery managers should consider adding this enchanting native to their product line.

**KEYWORDS:** Carolina bugbane, tasselrue, buttercup, Ranunculaceae

**NOMENCLATURE:** ITIS (1998)

that I know it all, and I'm bored with everything in the woods, something wonderful happens. This time it was a new discovery. Well, new to me anyway. And apparently it's new to about 99% of the people I talk to.

What is my discovery? *Trautvetteria caroliniensis* (Walt.) Vail (Ranunculaceae). I'll be the first to admit that the generic name is pretty choppy and really doesn't roll off the tongue like let's say, uh, *Tiarella*, *Viola*, or some of the other duo syllabic genera of plants native to West Virginia's mountains, but with all due respect to ER von Trautvetter (1809–1889), this plant is pretty cool.

I took my kids to the "ol' swimmin hole" on Spring Creek, about 8 km (5 mi) east of my farm. Here the "crick" makes a sharp bend, and over the centuries has created a

deep chasm etched out of the hard shale cliffs on the south bank—a really idyllic spot. After depositing the young ones in the water, I waded across the creek to the cliffs in faint hope of seeing something unusual. I was slowly emerging from the ice cold water, reaching out to grab hold of the slippery rocks when I smelled a sweet fragrance. It was a new scent to this large proboscis. Something slightly familiar but yet somewhat mysterious. Glancing up, I spotted the origin straight ahead.

At first glance, I thought I'd discovered a new species of *Thalictrum* L. (Ranunculaceae). We have 6 species in West Virginia, and I thought I knew them all. Immediately my mind raced ahead to the future, *Thalictrum glickii*. Wow, what a nice ring it has. At last, my 15 minutes of fame! Fame fled away as I looked beyond the icy white, fragrant, feathery flowers. Looking at the foliage, I was still positive that I was in the Ranunculaceae (Buttercup) family, but the glossy, dark green, deeply lobed leaves sure looked like a *Trollius* L. (Ranunculaceae). Now, West Virginia lacks a *Trollius* species, so the mystery deepened. In fact, the only *Trollius* species that I know of native to the US is *Trollius laxis* Salisb. (American globe-flower) and the closest it gets to West Virginia is Pennsylvania. Anyway, *Trollius laxis* is a spring-blooming, much shorter plant with soft, muted yellow flowers.

So with thousands of seedlings growing in every moist crack of the cliff, I had no qualms about borrowing a few to bring back to the nursery for identification, evaluation, and growing in the garden. As soon as I got home, I ran to my library, grabbed my copy of *Flora of West Virginia* (Core and Strausbaugh 1978) and began to confirm my knowledge of the genus *Thalictrum*. There, on the same page as *Thalictrum* I discovered my find. I realized that I wasn't that far off base in thinking that it was a *Thalictrum*, commonly known as meadowrue, since the common name for *Trautvetteria* is tasselrue. *Trautvetteria* calls 20 of our 55 counties home (Core and Strausbaugh 1978).

With this initial phase of my investigation coming to a close, it was time to start thinking about this new plant in the sense of garden worthiness. Many wild plants are better left in the wild because it's hard to find a suitable spot in the garden—I initially suspected *Trautvetteria* would fall into this category because my garden lacks a very wet area. Anyway, I posted an e-mail to the Alpine Group Listserve on the Internet. Don't let the name fool you, these folks cover the gamut of the plant world and I've never seen any question about any plant go unanswered. Sure enough, I got about a dozen e-mail replies to my question regarding growing *Trautvetteria* in the garden and was delighted to see that it does not require a particularly wet

area, just good garden soil, rich in organic matter, and a good mulch to conserve moisture in dry periods. One person on Long Island said that it “gently self sows” in her garden.

I also called Dr Dick Lighty, director of the Mount Cuba Center in Greenville, Delaware. Dick said that they’ve been growing *Trautvetteria* successfully for many years in the garden and wondered, as did I at this point, why it was unavailable in the nursery trade. In fact, while looking in the *Andersons Source Guide* (Isaacson 1993), the most comprehensive plant availability directory in the US, I noticed that only 1 source was listed for the plant.

*Trautvetteria* forms a 15 to 25-cm-tall (6 to 10 in) plant with a much taller flower stem. Some plants seemed to reach up to about 45 to 90 cm (18 to 36 in). It prefers light to medium shade but could probably take some direct sun. It flowers over a long period and seems to peak in late June to mid July.

Seeds ripen by August, and I capture seeds off my 54 stock plants in 10 x 15 cm (4 x 6 in) drawstring bags. I can collect well over 1000 seeds.

I fill 880-ml, 11-cm-deep pots (3.5 x 3.5 in Bandpots; Anderson Die & Mfc Co, Portland, Oregon) with Scotts Perennial Mix (65% to 75% bark fines; 20% to 25% peat moss; 9% to 15% perlite; The Scotts Company, Marysville, Ohio) and tamp the medium flat. As soon as I feel seeds in the bottom of the drawstring bag, I sow 50 to 75 seeds per pot, cover them with a light coating of medium equal to the thickness of the seed, and then add a layer of granite grit to discourage moss and liverwort growth and nibbling slugs and snails once the seedlings begin growing. At my farm, we simply put the pots out in the woods and let Mother Nature do her thing.



Photo by Barry Glick

Figure 1 • *Trautvetteria carolinensis* blooming in the author's garden.

Germination is often nearly 100%, and seedlings begin emerging throughout the winter and early spring. Seedlings receive Peters Plant Starter (9N:45P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>:15K<sub>2</sub>O; The Scotts Company, Marysville, Ohio) at 115 ppm N (0.5 tbsp/gal) after the first true set of leaves appear, and then weekly applications of Peters Peat-Lite Special (20N:10P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>:20K<sub>2</sub>O) at 115 ppm N (0.25 tbsp/gal). When the pot is fully rootbound, I transplant individ-

ual seedlings into 250-ml, 6.25-cm-deep pots (2.5 x 2.5 in Bandpots) and continue the weekly fertilizations. Plants are ready for sale 8 to 12 mo after seed collection.

This plant deserves some publicity and a home in every native and wild garden.

#### REFERENCE

- Core EL, Strausbaugh PD. 1978. Flora of West Virginia. Grantsville (WV): Seneca Books. 1079 p.
- [ITIS] Integrated Taxonomic Information System. 1998. Biological names. Version 4.0 [on-line database]. URL: <http://www.itis.usda.gov/plantproj/itis/itis-query.html> (accessed 4 Dec 1999).
- Isaacson RT (compiler). 1993. Anderson source guide. Chanhassen (MN): Anderson Horticultural Library / Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. 261 p.

#### Author Information

Barry Glick  
Sunshine Farm & Gardens  
Renick, WV 24966  
barry@sunfarm.com  
www.sunfarm.com