

## Pause for Plants Spring '06

Plants named for bird's beaks...?

What are they? Geraniums! Who would have known?

Our Wild Geraniums are mostly diminutive relatives of the showy cultivated geraniums. Two are native species; the small-flowered pale pink wild Carolina Geranium ( Geranium caroliniana ), and the larger-flowered pink to lavender Wild Spotted Geranium ( Geranium maculatum ). The former is mostly considered a weedy annual, the latter a desirable native perennial that can grace your home garden.

The name geranium is from the Greek "geranos" for "crane", and the family as well as its members are called cranesbill/s. Some are also commonly called Heronsbill, and in Germany where storks are venerated geraniums are called Storchenschnabel ( storksbill )!

So why is this group named for bird's beaks? It's easy to understand when you look at their fruit. After the flower's five petals wilt, the female part (pistil) develops an extension ( beak ) that extends from its swollen base, where five seeds develop, each within its own chamber. When seeds are "ripe" five sections of the beak split explosively and twist into spirals that assist with seed dispersal.

**Here are two beaked fruits of Dovefoot Geranium.**



Other than Carolina and Spotted geraniums, nearly all wild geraniums of the United States originated elsewhere. Three examples found in our region are: Dovefoot or Cranesbill Geranium( Geranium molle ), Cutleaf Geranium ( Geranium dissectum ), and Heronbill ( also called Storkbill ) Geranium, in a different genus ( Erodium cicutarium ).

Over the past 10 years or so, Dovefoot geranium has gotten pretty well established in the Donalds-Due West area of Abbeville County. This year Dovefoot populates a good quarter of our one acre yard forming nearly a monoculture. Even though the flowers are quite small, the whole area appears tinged with pink color.

**Here is a closer view of Dovefoot Geranium.**



Cutleaf geranium seems also to have gotten established in our region. The common name "Cutleaf" refers to very deep divisions of its leaf blades. These plants with small bright magenta blooms can be found in Due West and Hodges this week!

Also found blooming in Hodges is Heronsbill (also known as Redstem Storksbill geranium). Its fruits have the longest and most impressive "beaks". Heronsbill flowers bloom in a cluster called an umbel, and their fruits are also noticeably clustered. Leaves of this species are distinctively divided in a feathery fernlike fashion, botanically termed pinnate.

**Left to right, are leaves of Heronsbill, Carolina, Cutleaf, and Dovefoot Geraniums.**



The Geranium family includes over 700 species widely distributed in both hemispheres. It includes economically important species cultivated for gardens as well as "scented" species whose fragrant oils are used for perfumes, cosmetics and insect repellants. Several species including Spotted Geranium ( Geranium maculatum ) and Heronbill ( Erodium cicutarium ) have medicinal properties.

Photos of many Geranium species can be viewed at:

[http://plants.nrcs.usda.gov/cgi\\_bin/gallery\\_page.cgi?earl=gallery.cgi&category=genus&classes=all&sort=scisort&txtparm=Geranium&wetland=all&origin=all&results=thumbnails&pagenum=1](http://plants.nrcs.usda.gov/cgi_bin/gallery_page.cgi?earl=gallery.cgi&category=genus&classes=all&sort=scisort&txtparm=Geranium&wetland=all&origin=all&results=thumbnails&pagenum=1)