

SMALL WONDERS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JACKIE BAILEY LABOVITZ

Inspired by 12 plants Thomas Jefferson mentioned in his correspondence, artist Jackie Bailey Labovitz began a photographic quest for these plants over a decade ago. She titled the resulting portfolio *Understory*, to reflect the fact that all her plant subjects grow in the layer of vegetation – the “understory” – below the forest canopy. Continuing to photograph on public lands in the Shenandoah Valley, Labovitz has since added to Jefferson’s 12 species. The *Understory* portfolio now includes more than 30 images. The Glen Burnie Drawing Room installation includes eight of these.

Many of the plants featured in this exhibition are not only small, but elusive and ephemeral. To find and photograph

them, Labovitz pores over plant manuals to familiarize herself with the forms of the emerging leaves. Then she scours the forest floor for the diminutive shoots. Upon finding them, she tags a nearby tree to remind her of the plant’s location and returns daily until the blossom begins to unfold. As long as it’s not raining, she’s likely to be in the woods every day from March to August.

There is a little bit of artifice involved in the creation of these seemingly natural images. Once the blossom has achieved the maturity Labovitz is looking for, like a fashion stylist, she will groom the site.

Twinleaf (*Jeffersonia diphylla*)

Archival photograph on canvas

Heavy spring showers and wind almost immediately take away the Twinleaf’s tenuously attached petals.



She rakes everything just so, ties nearby foliage out of the way with shoestrings, and pins a decorative blanket of leaf litter barrier on the ground around her specimen. She carefully brushes the plant to make sure it's clean and even clamps it to keep it from moving so her very low shutter speed can capture its subject precisely.

Creating these immaculately simple images has taken years of work and unwavering patience. Labovitz achieves the point of view that makes these tiny plants seem so monumental by lying flat on the ground parallel with her subject. Dressed in a nylon parka and wearing knee and elbow pads (along with gloves and ear muffs in colder weather), she scoops out a hole in the ground to put her camera in, and waits for the light to be just right, without brash highlights or deadening shadows, before pushing the button that will release the shutter. What we see in each image is what Labovitz has seen through her viewfinder. She looks for the perfect composition that will – as she says – “make the rectangle interesting.”

To do this, Labovitz relies on her background in art. She looks at everything from Old Dutch Masters to French Impressionists to modernist painters. After earning her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Virginia Commonwealth University,

Labovitz taught art in public and private schools. She later received a fellowship with the National Endowment for the Arts after which she continued to serve the NEA as a consultant. For many years she worked as an independent art curator, assembling collections for corporations, consulates, and embassies. It wasn't until 2003 that she picked up a camera, took a photography class at a community college, and began photographing native flora and fauna around her rural home.

A deep love of nature and the outdoors, born of solitary childhood wanderings, also informs her work. As a youngster, Labovitz explored the woods around her parents' home in southwestern Virginia. There she spent countless hours capturing and identifying insects and neighboring animal and plant life.

Today, Jackie Bailey Labovitz splits her time between Washington D.C. and her home in the Shenandoah Valley. She also operates an art gallery, Cottage Curator, in Sperryville, Virginia, featuring the work of local, regional, and nationally recognized artists.

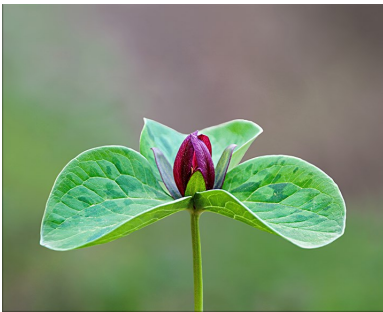
On the cover: **Twinleaf** (*Jeffersonia diphylla*) Physician, naturalist, botanist, and intellectual Benjamin Smith Barton (1766 – 1815) named this plant in honor of Thomas Jefferson, whom Smith considered a fellow naturalist. “Twinleaf” refers to the fact that its leaves are so deeply divided they appear like a pair.



Virginia Bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*)

Archival photograph on canvas

Virginia bluebells often grow in masses and occur throughout the eastern half of the U.S. in moist, woodland soil. They bloom in early spring and then become dormant until the next year. Butterfly gardeners are especially fond of Virginia bluebells because butterflies are the flower's chief pollinators. (Mentioned in Thomas Jefferson's correspondence.)



Little Sweet Betsy (*Triullium cuneatum*)

Archival photograph on canvas

This trillium flowers in the early spring in rich woodland soil. Its name is a corruption of the word "birth." Midwives used the plant to relax the mother, calling it "birthroot." Over time, "birthroot" became "Bethroot," then "Bet," and finally "Betsy." Blowflies or fruit flies provide pollen transportation services for little sweet Betsy.



Downy Yellow Violet (*Viola pubescens*)

Archival photograph on canvas

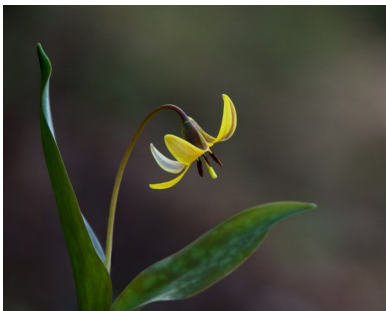
It may seem odd that a "violet" should be yellow, but all yellow violets have at least a touch of purple. This violet species is distinguished by the dark lines that extend from the center of the lowest petal, as well as by its heart-shaped leaves. It blooms in late spring, growing in rich soil throughout the eastern and central states.



Pink Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*)

Archival photograph on canvas

The pink lady's slipper typically flowers between May and July. Its color, veiny lines, and shape attract bees to enter the "slipper." But the bee can't go out the way it came in. The task of pollinating is exhausting for the bee, but once pollinated, the lady's slipper can generate up to 60,000 seeds. (Mentioned in Thomas Jefferson's correspondence.)



Trout Lily (*Erythronium americanum*)

Archival photograph on canvas

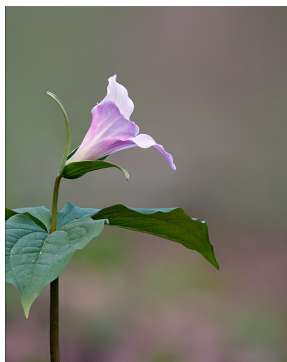
The name “trout lily” refers to the similarity between the brownish leaf markings and the coloring of a brown or brook trout. Each stalk bears a single, nodding flower whose petals curl back. It blooms for about two weeks in mid-spring. Only one percent of the plants in a trout lily colony flower each year.



Dwarf Violet Iris
(*Iris Verna*)

Archival
photograph on
canvas

The name of this plant comes from the Greek goddess Iris, messenger between the gods and humans. Because Iris led the souls of deceased women to the realm of the dead, people planted irises on the graves of women. The dwarf iris blooms in early spring in dry pine forests. The Greeks used the rhizome of this species along with flour to create a variety of pasta.



White Trillium

(*Triullium
grandiflora*)

Archival
photograph on
canvas

This plant takes two years to germinate and up to ten years before it is large and strong enough to bloom. It occurs throughout the eastern half of North America with flowers appearing in April to early June, depending on the location. White trillium is white when young but turns pink as it matures. (Mentioned in Thomas Jefferson’s correspondence.)

Nancy M. Huth

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For more information about Jackie Bailey Labovitz, visit her web site at www.baileylabovitz.com.

For more information on wildflowers, visit www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers or



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