While following paths through the conifer forests in the Northstate, hikers often encounter the shiny, bright green, heart-shaped leaves of wild ginger plants. For me, these happy hearts on the forest floor are enough to bring a smile to my face. The dense patches that grow together under a shady canopy, the deep green color, the white marbled venation, the easily recognizable shape—all these characteristics of the wild ginger leaves make for a lovely forest encounter.

But the real treasure of wild ginger plants is secreted away under those verdant hearts. The flowers of wild ginger always strike me as about as peculiar and alien as any plant I can imagine, but, unfortunately, most people miss them completely! The flower is found right near the ground on a short stalk, or peduncle. The flower actually has no showy petals but instead is made up of three dark maroon or brown sepals covered in...
gray hairs, with tips elongated and swept back to reveal red stripes on the hairy inside of the flower. From about March until June, Northstate botany enthusiasts should be able to find some of these unusual specimens. But unless you take the time to stop, bend down, and part the leaves to look underneath, the unusual flowers will go completely unnoticed. What a shame that would be! Wild ginger flowers are certainly a memorable botanical experience.

California has four species of wild ginger, all with similar habits and looks, but separated slightly by range or character differences. The two most common are *Asarum hartwegii*, or Hartweg’s wild ginger, and *Asarum caudatum*, or creeping wild ginger. Hartweg’s wild ginger is the most common in the conifer forests around Redding, while creeping wild ginger is commonly found in Trinity County and along the North Coast.

Though called wild ginger, this plant is not related to the ginger normally used in the kitchen. The wild ginger name comes from the aroma that the leaves emit when crushed, or that the rhizomes (underground stems) emit when broken apart. There is some evidence that native people from California and in other parts of the Northwest used the plants to make a tea as a cure for a variety of ailments including coughs, colds, and indigestion. However, researchers have now determined that wild ginger plants contain poisonous chemicals that are harmful to humans if consumed. So even though its name sounds inviting, it’s best to leave this wild plant in the forest and pick up some cooking ginger at the grocery store to use in the kitchen.

Often plants with unusual flowers have uncommon methods of pollination or seed dispersal. These uncommon methods often helped drive the evolution of the unusual flowers. In the case of wild ginger, some researchers have suggested that pollination occurs by flies and gnats that are attracted to the rotten-flesh color and the sometimes musty, rotting smell that the flowers
produce. However, other researchers have found that wild ginger relies heavily on self-pollination, instead. Seed dispersal in wild gingers is significantly aided by ants, which benefit from the location of the flower on the forest floor. The wild ginger seed is equipped with a protein- and fat-rich structure called an elaiosome. The ants harvest the seeds and feed the elaiosomes to their larvae. When the elaiosome has been removed, the ants discard the seed into their “trash pile.” The seed remains unharmed throughout the process and is thus dispersed to new locations and deposited in a fertile bed of organic matter to begin its germination. With such atypical pollination and seed dispersal strategies, it is no wonder wild ginger flowers seem almost extra-terrestrial!

Next time you find yourself in a conifer forest, keep an eye out for the deep green, heart-shaped leaves of wild ginger that announce their hidden flowers to all those who know to look for them.

A close-up of the creeping wild ginger flower shows the dense gray hairs that cover the sepals and the bright yellow pollen on the inside waiting for a pollinating fly. Photo by Steve Laymon.