

Carolina geranium

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If you are trying to remember the scientific names of some of these Range Plant articles then just remember that the common name of Carolina geranium is a near inverse of the scientific name, *Geranium carolinanum*. The genus name of *Geranium* comes from the Geranium family while the species name *carolinanum* refers to the state where it was first identified. Enough of the botanical geek speak, what value is there in having Carolina geranium upon your land?

Carolina geranium is a cool season, native annual or biennial forb. Winter annuals are sometimes just considered weeds while others like Texas filaree, California filaree and Carolina geranium are considered valuable winter forage for livestock and wildlife. Growing 6 to 12 inches tall with many horizontal, spreading stems that may stretch to 12 to 24 inches in length. The leaves are simple, alternate, opposite or occasionally three at a node, being 1½ to 2½ inches across. The leaves are palmately divided, meaning they spread out like the fingers from your palm. They are often divided into five lobes with each lobe again being divided or cleft with rounded tips. This past December, while looking for winter rosettes of distaff thistle, I saw the newly emerged rounded tips on tiny leaves of geranium. These winter seedlings were still small enough to have been covered with a dime but displayed the characteristics needed for identification. All parts of the leaves and stems are covered with short white hairs. Flowers have five pale pink or white petals, ¼ to ¾ inch long, formed in terminal clusters. Flowers appear from March to May as the plants begin to mature in size. Fruits are five-seeded with straight tails and a total length of 1½ inches. The shape of these fruits will remind you of filaree fruits having a seed attached to a shaft much like a spear. There is a central column around which the five seeds and thin stalks are attached. Upon maturity the stalks begin to dry and curl which pulls the seeds away from the central column. The seeds usually separate from the stalks shortly after falling from the plants.

These plants have numerous values for livestock and wildlife. The leaves are eaten by livestock, deer, quail and turkey. Quail and turkey will break off ½ inch long leaf segments and begin eating the leaves in late January through March when the previous year's seeds become scarce and other green vegetation is lacking. Seeds mature in May to June and are eaten by game and songbirds. During the early spring the leaves of Carolina geranium might be mistaken for those of the species of winecups. You can tell them apart by looking at the base of the leaves where winecups show a pair of small leaf-like structures called stipules, each being ¼ to ½ inch long. Geranium does not have these stipules.

Management of Carolina geranium involves being observant of the winter annuals and perennials growing this time of year and noticing if there is any overuse happening. Excessive numbers of native and/or exotic wildlife will put extreme grazing pressure upon these forbs. Maintaining deer numbers within the carrying capacity of the land is important for all plants including Carolina geranium. If livestock are in the pastures, they will readily consume the tender, green annuals which may prevent seed production for the year. It is likely that there are still seeds of Carolina geranium in the soil that has not sprouted so you should see new seedlings of this forb next winter. Rotational grazing through multiple pastures will allow the plants to mature in alternating years ensuring that this annual will remain a part of the

landscape. A planned grazing strategy, previously called a planned grazing system, will ensure that all pastures receive rest from grazing during all seasons every 3 to 4 years or sooner. Carolina geranium prefers the tighter clay and clay loam soils and can be found in all vegetational regions with the exception of the High Plains. Hopefully you have received enough winter moisture to germinate these desirable forbs, put boots on your land and see if you can identify Carolina geranium during late winter into spring. Good hunting.

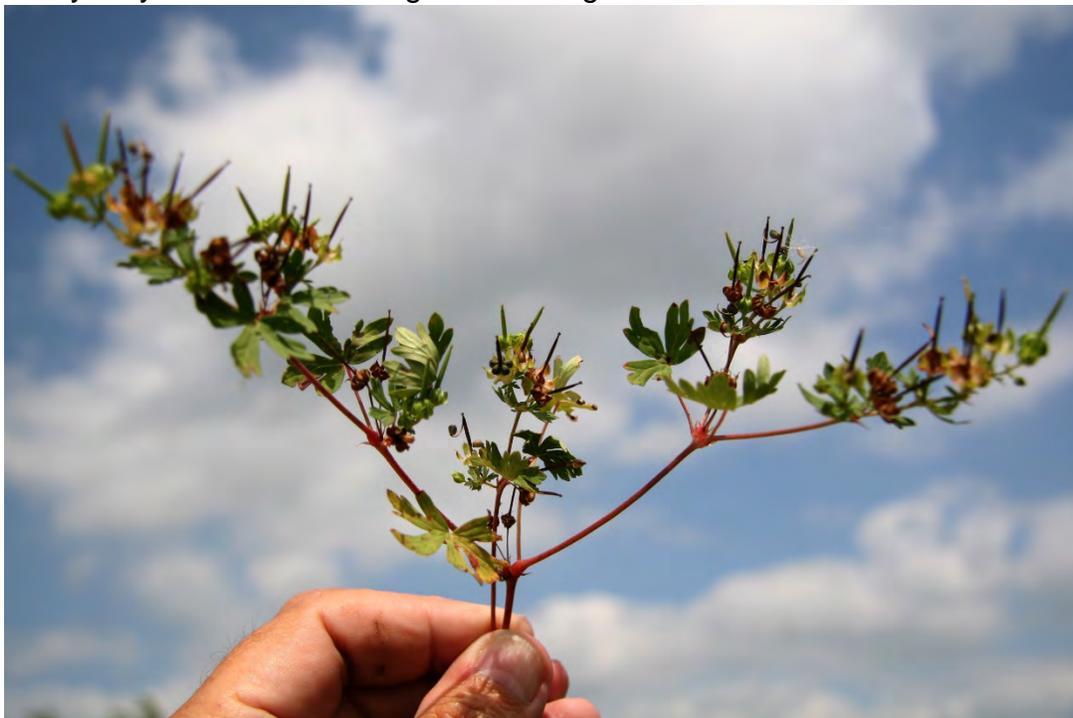
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Photo Captions:

- 1 By March leaves of Carolina geranium are rapidly growing and tiny flowers are present.



2. By May fruits of Carolina geranium begin to mature.



3. The palmate appearance of the leaves without stipules proves this to be Carolina geranium.



4 Carolina geranium is a producer of numerous seeds readily eaten by birds.



5 Close-up of the 5 seeds arranged around a central column.



6 Seeds of Carolina geranium are one-sixteenth inch in length.

