

The Tale of Two Solomons; Which One Is True?

The spring wildflowers continue their wonderful show in May; so many it is hard to know which ones to pick to write about! So to make it easier on decision-making, I'm writing about two – our Solomon's Seals. They have a similar overall appearance with their single unbranched, upright stems that arch gracefully from the ground. Both are commonly found in Pennsylvania woodlands and throughout the eastern and central United States. These two Solomon Seals are perfect selections for shade/partial shade gardens. Their preference is for average to good garden soils of the type that would develop in our sylvan woodlands. They are disease free.

I have long liked to find the early spikes of these plants emerging in the spring amid our earlier blooming wildflowers such as Trillium and Wild Blue Phlox. Both species last through the fall and produce fruit enjoyed by birds and small mammals. Their characteristic arching stems add a unique accent to the shade garden.

Smooth Solomon's Seal - *Polygonatum biflorum*

Smooth Solomon's Seal, a member of the Lily family, generally grows to 2 ½ to 3' feet tall and can spread to form small colonies although not aggressively so. The plant derives its name from the leaf scar on the rhizome, which is said to resemble the seal of the biblical King Solomon.

Small bell-shaped flowers emerge greenish-white in late April to early May and mature to white or pale yellow. They hang in clusters of two or more below the leaves so are not easily visible. Alternate, parallel-veined leaves clasp the single arching stem and lend this plant its attractive character. This pattern of leaf attachment is one way to differentiate between these two species when flowers or fruit are not visible.

The flowers are visited by Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, bumblebees, medium-sized digger bees and smaller native bees that are better able to climb into the flower to access the nectar. Bumblebees, which collect pollen and nectar, use "buzz pollination" to release the pollen grains. To read more about the wonder of buzz-pollination, visit the [Bumblebee Con-](#)



<https://mtcubacenter.org/plants/small-solomons-seal/>



<https://www.facebook.com/WildflowersOfWesternPennsylvania/posts/1748064598616874>

[ervation Trust](#). [The Native Plant Trust](#) identifies Smooth Solomon's Seal as practically indestructible and a "Pollinator Powerhouse Plant."

Dark blue-black berries ripen later in the season (August-September) and are a food source for various woodland birds though the fruit is considered poisonous to us and our pets.

In the fall the leaves will turn a golden yellow. There is also a variety found in the wild, *Polygonum biflorum* var. *commutatum* that can grow 3-5' high. It is sometimes called *P. canaliculatum*. Reports are varied as to whether this species is eaten by deer. I have found it identified as deer and rabbit resistant although an alternate reference states the opposite.

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False Solomon's Seal ***Maianthemum racemosum***

False Solomon's Seal is also commonly found in woodland habitats where it can grow up to 3 feet tall. It can be found throughout the U.S. The leaf scar on the rhizome is circular and doesn't look like the seal of the biblical King Solomon as it does on *Polygonatum biflorum*; hence its name. This woodland wildflower is a member of the Asparagus family. The root stock is rhizomatous; this plant will also develop small colonies but is considered well-behaved.

Although False Solomon's Seal appears similar to Smooth Solomon's Seal at first glance, the white flowers of this species develop at the tip of the stem in a branching panicle that can be quite showy. Each individual flower is small, only about 1/6 of an inch across,



<https://gobotany.nativeplanttrust.org/species/polygonatum/biflorum/>



<https://mtcubacenter.org/plants/false-solomons-seal/>



<https://www.facebook.com/WildflowersOfWesternPennsylvania/photos/a.444357485654265/839465036143506>

however the full panicle can be up to 4" long. It blooms in late spring for about 3 weeks; the flower cluster is just becoming visible now around Mother's Day.

Flowers are visited by small bees, flies and a number of different beetles for pollen; moths and butterflies visit for nectar. Heather Holmes' [Pollinators of Native Plants](#) provides more specific information.

Leaves are similarly parallel-veined and alternately placed along the stem but do not clasp the stem in the same way. The stem takes on a zig-zag appearance. False Solomon's Seal is broadly tolerant of various soil types and moisture conditions. Once established it is drought tolerant.

Pollinated flowers develop small berries about ¼" in size, that ripen from whitish-green to bright red; final coloration of the fruit is influenced by soil pH. A wide variety of birds and small mammals consume the berries and help disperse the seeds. Leaves are occasionally browsed by deer but the leaves are unpalatable to most herbivores. It is considered deer resistant. Fruit is not edible.



<https://plantfinder.nativeplanttrust.org/plant/Maianthemum-racemosum>

For more reading about these wildflowers, see [Wildflowers of Western Pennsylvania](#) on Facebook. Use the search tool and search for the scientific name.