

# Early Nancy - an early starter in spring

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Early Nancy - a charming early starter to the spring flowering in our grasslands and woodlands.

The Early Nancy is a small perennial lily, which grows from a tuber, and for most of the year is quite invisible. But in the early spring, to herald the new flowering season, fresh shoots emerge, grow quickly to a height of five to fifteen cm, and produce an array of white flowers.

The flowers look to have six petals, but actually have three petals and three sepals. The botanists say there are six "*tepals*" because the petals and sepals are hard to differentiate. Each flower has a distinctive inner circle of maroon, purple or reddish and consequently in some places they are called Bulls-eyes. This lily is widespread throughout Australia, and its preferred habitat is in grassy areas, doing better on seepage slopes or other seasonally damp places.

In a dry spring many of the tubers will remain dormant and the plants unseen. But locally, when there is good rain, the Early Nancy is a common sight on good grassy remnants. This is not the case for disturbed sites, however, nor for those that are heavily grazed, as these plants don't cope well under stress and tend to disappear.

For the Early Nancy the male and female flowers differ and occur on separate plants, with the female producing a three-celled oval shaped fruit six to ten mm long. The drawing shows the whole male plant with male flowers, and the upper part of the female with the swelling fruit. The fruit contains a number of small round seeds. As the warm weather advances the plants soon wither, but for a time, the dried out plants remain standing, the females with their fruit split open and the seeds held aloft in cup like structures.

The scientific name for Early Nancy is *Wurmbea dioica*. "*Wurmbea*" comes from the name of a Dutchman from Java of the 18th century, F. van Wurmbe, who was a naturalist, amateur botanist and merchant; "*dioica*" comes from the Greek and means "two houses", referring to the plant's habit of having male and female reproductive organs on separate plants.