

Jack in the Pulpit: Springtime blooms (c) 2008 Mark Spreyer



Jack in the Pulpit photographed at Stillman on 5/17/08

Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*)

It is the peculiar design of its blossom that has earned this plant its common name. It sports a striped green hood or "pulpit" which curls over "Jack," a club-shaped organ known as a spadix. It is at the base of the spadix, where the tiny flowers, either male or female, are to be found. How can you tell a male Jack from a female Jill? The simple answer is count the leaves. If it only has one three-parted leaf, it's a male. If it has two, it's a female. And yes, to you Latin scholars, the species name, *triphyllum*, refers to this wildflower's three-parted leaf. The fascinating part of this species' natural history is that a particular plant's gender is negotiable. That is to say, one year's Jack may be next year's Jill. If a large female has a few bad years, researchers have found that in the following year it may produce only one leaf and flower as a male. The reverse is also true. Should that scrawny male enjoy good growing conditions, it can regain its status as a large, multi-leaved female. This sequential hermaphroditism makes me wonder what we should properly call this wildflower. Jack-in-the-Pulpit? Jill-in-the-Pulpit? Wait a second, I've got it. Rue Paul-in-the-pulpit.