

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #80 answer: DODDER (*Cuscuta campestris*)

Cuscuta, a genus as sprawling as its habit, takes its name from *kushkut*, an Arabic word for tangled hair. Folk names for dodder invoke love, hate, and the supernatural: goldthread, love vine, devil's hair, hellbine, wizard's net, witch's shoelaces. The more we learn about it, the more curious it is.

One dodder plant can make several thousand seeds, which survive in soil for up to 20 years. Seeds wait until soil warms above 85° F, when hosts are well established. The yellow threadlike seedlings are leafless stems, with food for a few days only, so they have to find a host plant fast. They grow toward the green light emitted by chlorophyll. When they reach a green plant, they send out haustoria, big structures that attach to obtain water and nutrients. Then the dodder's own roots die. New haustoria keep on forming as the dodder grows, which it does at a prodigious rate, up to 3 inches a day.

Dodder can be a crop pest (some people call it a vampire), but the story is more nuanced. Probing a potential host, it exchanges RNA, persuading the host that it is not really a stranger. Our species is a generalist, so the same vine can link dozens of species. Through dodder's network, these plants share chemical messages, such as warnings about insects.

Dodder also seems to borrow a host plant's signal to flower, blooming at the same time. Bend over the "spaghetti" of yellow-to-orange stems with a hand lens, and admire the cream-colored flowers. Just an eighth of an inch wide, they are bell-shaped, with five waxy lobes. They are most likely self-pollinated.

Research suggests that antioxidants in dodder might slow the growth of cancer cells and safeguard human kidneys, liver, and nerves. In folklore, dodder has another use. Throw a piece over your shoulder. If after three days the dodder has found a host, your sweetheart loves you. Your chances are excellent.

WILDFLOWER #81

Clues: Flamboyant in the fall, this vine helps migrating birds.



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