

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #81 answer: VIRGINIA CREEPER (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)

It's hardly possible to find a native with more mixed reviews than Virginia creeper, a member of the Vitaceae, the grape family.

Why the bad rap? Virginia creeper is what one botanist calls “rambunctious.” It can grow 20 feet in one year and reach lengths of 100 feet. To protect from herbivory, the tissues and sap contain needle-sharp crystals of calcium oxalate. These raphides irritate some people’s skin—one reason why people confuse it with poison ivy, though the two vines are otherwise quite unlike. Poison ivy has leaflets in threes; and the stem attaches by fine aerial rootlets, giving it a hairy appearance as it climbs. Virginia creeper has leaflets in fives, and it attaches by holdfasts—branching tendrils that have disks on five to seven tips. Secreting calcium carbonate, the disks cement themselves to a tree or to a wall. Probably this is not what you want on the wall of your house.

Then why the fan club? The enthusiastic growth of Virginia creeper, and the way its adventitious roots grip the ground, means it is useful to control erosion. Though the greenish-white clusters of 1/4 inch flowers are drab and rarely noticed, they give nectar and pollen to bee pollinators. Then they produce beautiful blue-black fruits. Migrating birds and winter resident birds of at least 35 species rely on these fruits (which would shut down a human’s kidneys) and disperse the seeds. Mice, skunks, chipmunks, and deer can eat the leaves and stems, braving the calcium oxalate. The leaves also host the larvae of the Virginia creeper sphinx moth, Achemon sphinx moth, and Grapeleaf skeletonizer. First nation herbalists even turned Virginia creeper bark into treatments for conditions ranging from gonorrhea to lockjaw.

Best of all, Virginia creeper comes into its glory in the fall. Before most trees turn color, the alternate, palmately compound leaves flame a gorgeous wine red, which likely signals to birds that the fruits are ready. Enjoy!

WILDFLOWER #82

Clues: From these skinny pods, seeds will float on silken threads.



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