

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #85 answer: EASTERN REDCEDAR (*Juniperus virginiana*)

Eastern redcedar has seen a lot of history. Among the first species to spring up on cleared or damaged land, it is often crowded out by new hardwoods. If not, it outlasts other pioneers; one tree was dated at 900 years. 3000 years ago the Mississippian culture of Illinois made “Woodhenges”—circles of huge posts of redcedar. Later, first peoples used redcedar to make fine longbows and to mark hunting territories. They recognized the marvelous rot resistance of the fine-grained, red heartwood. During the Dust Bowl, farmers in the Great Plains planted redcedar wind breaks to save their soil; this tree dislikes shade but can thrive in drought.

Redcedars are alternate hosts for cedar-apple rust, so it is risky to let them grow near orchards. But we have a lot to thank them for. You might have a cedar closet or recall fragrant old-fashioned pencils. That was eastern redcedar; under the fibrous, red-brown bark, which hangs off in strips, volatile oils called terpenes give the wood its scent and insect resistance. Terpenes in cones lend flavor to gin, named for the genus.

Male cones are yellow, on the branch tips. But the surprising female cones, on their own trees, develop a waxy blue outer flesh, so they look like berries. This adaptation encourages birds to disperse the hard-shelled seeds; passing through birds, seeds are three times more apt to germinate. Cedar waxwings flock to redcedars to feast and hide. In winter, the cones are an important food for birds from bluebirds to turkeys.

The leaves are a last surprise. The tree is not a cedar but a juniper, part of the cypress family. It has a juniper’s two kinds of foliage. Young leaves are awl-shaped, sharp and spreading, discouraging browsers. Adult leaves have tiny glands on their backs. Scale-shaped, pressed together in twos (sometimes threes), adult leaves are decussate—grouped at right angles. They form a pattern like a braided lanyard.

WILDFLOWER #86

Clues: Easy to spot in winter, this subshrub’s leaf sports a white stripe.

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