

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #93 answer: ANISEROOT (*Osmorhiza longistylis*)

Shift fallen leaves on a forest floor, and you might well find frail-seeming new leaves of aniseroot overwintering, getting a head start on spring. Nibble a leaf edge for a faint anise flavor and scent. Anise pervades the whole plant; cooks have chopped the fleshy root to substitute for fennel, and herbalists have tried it in place of black licorice. The plant is named for this: *osmo-* is smell and *rhiza* is root. Of course, if you taste, be certain not to pick another member of the Apiaceae, the Parsley family, such as poison hemlock. (Think Socrates.)

The lobed leaves are biternate—in three sets of three. Three leaves spring from a hairy node on the smooth stem; and from each of them, three leaves rise in turn. Upper leaves are short-stalked or even sessile; lower leaves have long petioles.

In May, aniseroot's tiny white flowers bloom in compound umbels, typical of the family. This design is like a five-spoked umbrella with 9 to 18 smaller umbrellas (umbellets) at the end of each spoke. In turn, each umbellet has 9 to 18 flowers. A striking feature of the flower is two white styles, reaching well above the five petals, granting easy access for bees, flies, and small moths. These long styles distinguish this plant from Sweet cicely, *Osmorhiza claytonii*.

From June to August, you see the remains of those styles, two little prongs at the tip of each narrow, dry fruit. Covered in appressed hairs, the seeds stick to animals' fur or your socks. They need a period of very warm temperature followed by cold to germinate. It might take 18 months before new aniseroot pops up.

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Clues: A wavy outline—widening and narrowing—shows this plant's growing seasons.



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