

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #102 answer: VIRGINIA PENNYWORT (*Obolaria virginica*)

Virginia pennywort is the most mysterious member of the Gentian family. It is the only one in its genus, though many unrelated plants share the common name. (Be sure you call it Virginia pennywort for clarity.) It grows in almost every county of Virginia and north to New Jersey, but spotting it in early spring on a rich forest floor is a challenge. No one knows how abundant it is, really. Plants do not form colonies, but spread out. Hard-to-see gray-green leaves cluster on a stubby, fleshy stem.

The dull color of the leaves hints at its metabolism; with little chlorophyll, it only partly supports itself with photosynthesis. Another hint is the roots, which have no root hairs, are shaped like coral, and are full of fungal hyphae. Like others of the Gentian family, this plant depends partly on nutrients from other plants. They appear to come from decaying organic matter through a dense network of mycorrhizae.

Layered at the leaf nodes are lovely white to pale lavender flowers, forming a thick bouquet. Mysteries abound: Who pollinates them? Are they self-fertile? Are the two lobes of the flower actually sepals, or bracts? (They are not technically petals.) Does anything eat the seeds, and if not, why not?

Not a lot is known about *Obolaria*'s chemicals, either. First nations used it for coughs, fever, and poultices. A hot-water extract from the roots was a treatment for cuts.

The Latin name *Obolaria* originally belonged to twinflower. When Linnaeus claimed that plant for his own, calling it *Linnaea borealis*, the old name was recycled. An obol is an ancient Greek coin, somewhat rounded, as the leaves are. Obols were low in value, like our pennies. People placed them on the eyelids of a corpse to pay Charon to ferry the soul across the River Styx.

WILDFLOWER #103

Clues: This little pink-white member of the mustards is scattered on the forest floor.



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