

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #104 answer: TWINLEAF (*Jeffersonia diphylla*)

This member of the Barberry family is unique to the United States and Canada; indeed, there is only one other species of twinleaf, in Japan. There are two genetically distinct populations. The one in the South descends from plants that stayed warm during the last Ice Age; the one in the north descends from plants that hung on in refugia. When you see clusters of twinleaf in the woods, you know that there is limestone below. Benjamin Smith Barton, “the Father of American botany,” named this plant for his friend Thomas Jefferson.

Recognize twinleaf by its long-stemmed leaves, growing directly from an underground rhizome. They come up folded and a pale delicate pink. Each leaf is divided almost all the way into two leaflets, resembling butterfly wings or a bow tie. Unlike spring ephemerals, the stalks keep lengthening into summer and the leaves last till fall.

By May, the equally distinctive fruit matures. The pear-shaped capsule gives the plant two common names: helmet pod, because of the shape; and ground squirrel pea, because chipmunks and squirrels eat it. When it is ripe, a hinged lid pops open and the “pot” bends over to spill seeds. Ants disperse the seeds, attracted by the nutritious elaiosomes. If rodents eat seeds, they do not germinate, but seeds carried off by ants are viable. The embryo needs warmth to develop, limiting the plant’s northern range. Then it has to be chilled before it will germinate, limiting its southern range.

A single flower springs from the rhizome on its own leafless stalk in April, with eight short-lived white petals. Small halictid bees pollinate the flower. If not, a few days after the flower appears and quickly drops its petals, the eight yellow stamens bend inward, so that the plant self-pollinates.



A FAREWELL TO WoW! This is the last Wildflower of the Week in a series spanning two eventful years. This project has kept us grounded through the time when we could not gather in person to celebrate our love of plants.

It has been a delight for the two of us to dig deeper than before into the history and unique qualities of each native plant, and the ways it gives to and receives from other lives. This project has helped us grow—and we hope it has done the same for you.

You can explore all 104 WoWs with clues and answers together on Instagram at @piedmontvnps. The series follows time of year in the Piedmont Chapter’s area, across 68 different plant families, so you have two years’ worth of natives to rediscover or reconfirm.

Thank you for following along with us. Keep treasuring and safeguarding the natural world! If you are not yet a member of the Virginia Native Plant Society, join us at vnps.org.

We could never have done this without our team who sent out and posted WoWs – Richard Stromberg, Ashley Landes, Mark Murphy, Bryan Payne, and Kim Strader.

Emily Southgate & Kristin Zimet

