

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #16 answer: **POKE MILKWEED** (*Asclepias exaltata*)

Milkweed flowers are elegant. In the center is a complex disc of fused male and female parts. Around it is the corona— a crown of five incurved hoods, each bearing a horn. Nectar pools at the base of each horn. Poke milkweed's horns stick out, longer than the hoods. Around the outside, five petal-like parts bend over backward.

Monarchs, great spangled fritillaries, tiger swallowtails, skippers, and pearl crescents sip nectar from poke milkweed's hoods. So do bees. Positioning to sip, an insect might get its foot caught in a special slit, gluing on a two-part sac of pollen. All is well— provided the insect is strong enough to lift off.

Milkweeds are perilous in other ways. The stem and leaf veins are full of milky, sticky latex whose cardiac glycosides fatally increase the force of the heart. Mammals learn to avoid them. Still, certain insects, especially beetles, thrive on poke milkweed's foliage by eating seedpods or between the veins of the leaves. Monarch caterpillars and other insects accumulate the toxins, which protect them.

Poke milkweed has a more northern range than other milkweeds. Populations in the south maintain their ancient genetic diversity, but those that moved north after the last ice age lost much of theirs, so are likely less resilient to environmental change.

WILDFLOWER #17

Clues: A thick white midrib and a net of silvery veins stand out on the dark evergreen leaves of this handsome little orchid. Soft tiny hairs cover the flowers and their stalk.

