

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #17 DOWNY RATTLESNAKE PLANTAIN (*Goodyera pubescens*)

Downy rattlesnake plantain is a success story. From Quebec to Florida, this is the most common native orchid in eastern North America. It handles deciduous or coniferous woods, moist or dry soil, sand or clay. It loves to grow among old tulip poplars and white oaks, in ground dense with root fungi (mycorrhizae). Thinning the forest, though, sets it back.

This native is a late bloomer. Triggered by a dry, hot spring, it sends up a cylindrical spike of small white flowers in late summer to early fall. Sometimes it takes several years for the right weather. Then all the local plants bloom together.

Once flowers fade, the fleshy root makes offshoots, forming new clonal rosettes. In recent decades, more deer are browsing on the leaves. In response, roots have begun making a higher number of new rosettes. A worse threat is nonnative earthworms. The worms change the chemistry of leaf litter, inhibiting mycorrhizae. The light seeds, lacking stored nutrients, depend on these fungi to feed baby roots for a year or more.

Many orchids lure pollinators with false promises, but downy rattlesnake plantain comes through with pollen for sweat bees, as other rattlesnake plantain species do for bumblebees.

WILDFLOWER #18

Clues: This cheerful yellow flower in the bean family forms large, tall patches in meadows. In the fall the long, segmented pods turn a striking black.

