

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #24 Answer: NEW YORK IRONWEED (*Vernonia noveboracensis*)

Ironweed is named for its toughness. The leaves stand out stiffly, the purple-green stems are hard to break, and the roots are difficult to dig, spreading by runners as they grip the ground. It persists in inhospitable soil. You might recall the hardness of Jack Nicholson's character in the movie *Ironweed*.

The Latin name for the genus *Vernonia* honors William Vernon, a British naturalist who explored the American colonies in 1698. (Whether he was hardy, history does not tell.)

This member of the Asteraceae has no ray flowers. Up to 40 heads of disk flowers mass together in a corymb. This means outer pedicels are longer than inner ones, so the flowers wind up forming a flat "table" for pollinators. Each flower's five-lobed tube holds five stamens and a slim pistil, and plenty of nectar for butterflies and bees. Below the flower head, purple-green bracts form a woven pattern.

A new strength of ironweed might soon be revealed. Researchers at the University of Hawaii are engaged in a five-year study on the efficacy of ironweed to heal aggressive and hard-to-treat forms of breast and brain cancer. In laboratory cultures, ironweed's chemicals have killed cells of glioblastoma.

WILDFLOWER #25

Clues: The graceful white sprays of these odd flowers appear above a whorl of three leaves.

