

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #26 AMERICAN PENNYROYAL (*Hedeoma pulegioides*)

The sharp aroma of American pennyroyal survives even into winter. Pick up a dried stalk and rub it between your fingers to release the pungent scent, which comes from small glands on the leaves.

In the first century A.D., naturalist Pliny the Elder named the European pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium*) from the word *pulex*, Latin for flea. Both the European and American pennyroyal, cousins in the mint family, have been used for centuries as insect repellants. People wore pennyroyal in bags around their necks. Pet owners still sprinkle it on dog beds, and hikers sometimes rub pennyroyal on their skin to discourage mosquitoes and horse flies. Taken internally, there are less happy results: pulegone, the active ingredient, is toxic to the liver, causing organ failure. This chemical keeps pennyroyal safe from herbivores.

The flowers are so small you need a hand lens to enjoy them, but they are the right size for many insects. The nectar and pollen attract very small bees. Among them are little carpenter bees (*Ceratina* spp.), halictid bees, and the dagger bee, *Calliopsis andreniformis*. Syrphid flies feed on the pollen.

### WILDFLOWER #27

**Clues:** This understory tree is a show-stopper in the fall, with scarlet leaves and dark blue fruit.

