

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #28 Answer: WATER STARGRASS (*Heteranthera dubia*)

The name water stargrass focuses on the constellation of tiny star-shaped flowers, one per plant, lasting a single day. Another name, grassleaf mudplantain, describes the leaves. In slow-moving water the leaves are very long and thin. In swift water they are shorter and wider, but still grasslike.

H. dubia is an oddity. Most species in the genus *Heteranthera* have two kinds of stamens, but this plant's stamens are all the same; hence it is *dubia*, or "doubtful".

Many water stargrass flowers form underwater and never open. Such plants are cleistogamous, which means "married in secret". These closed flowers are self-fertilizing. Pollen grains germinate inside the anthers and grow out through a pore into the stigma and down the style to the ovules. There can be so many pollen tubes that they glue the stamens to the pistils. If flowers do open above water, often they are already pollinated. The plant can also reproduce by breaking off a fragment, which drifts away and roots in mud.

Water stargrass is an obligate wetland species - it can grow nowhere else. It also needs high light to grow well, so it is a sign of clear water. It feeds many small aquatic herbivores, such as chironomids (nonbiting midges). It is also food for Canada goose, northern pintail, blue-winged teal, and wading birds.

WILDFLOWER #29

Clues: This shrubby tree has flowers with four strappy yellow petals. Look for them around Halloween.

