

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #30 answer: **DOLL'S EYES** (*Actaea pachypoda*)

What name will you choose: endearing or alarming? Call it doll's eyes for the deep purple spot on the white fruit. Or call it baneberry for its poison. If you wound any part of *Actaea pachypoda*, it releases a toxin deadly to mammals; yet birds such as yellow-bellied sapsuckers and American robins eat the berries and disperse the seeds.

Oddly, the flower's stigma does not have a style. It sits right on top of the ovary, like a toupee, and persists as a purple dot on the white (occasionally red) fruit. It is surrounded by several stamens and 3 to 7 white petals. The ovaries perch on pedicels that turn bright red and thicken as the fruit ripens, earning the name *pachypoda* "thick foot." The bright white-on-red is an invitation to birds and a warning to others.

Actaea pachypoda is most distinctive in Fall, when the fruits stand out against the brown leaves on the forest floor. It grows in cool, mostly deciduous forests, in shade or semi-shade, especially in the mountains. The leaves bleach if they get too much sun.

Baneberry produces no nectar. Its pollinators are mostly short-tongued bees, who collect pollen, possibly to feed their larvae, and mating and foraging beetles. Lacking these, it can be autogamous (self-pollinating). This backup ensures fruit-set is near complete.

WILDFLOWER #31

Clues: This gender-bender bears a brilliant spike of red-orange berries.



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