

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #31 answer: JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT (*Arisaema triphyllum*)

Jack-in-the-pulpit comes up in Spring with two leaves, each with three leaflets, tightly furled in a plain brown wrapper. Once they expand, the unusual flower arises. It has a spathe—a sheath with a hood like the canopy covering a pulpit, green or purple or striped. Standing within is the preacher, a club-shaped spadix—Jack.

Or is it Jill? Peer inside the spathe to tell the sex: male anthers look yellow, female stigmas are green bumps.

When a young plant has little food stored in its corm, ♂Jackö bears male parts. In a few years, with enough saved-up sugars, it adds female parts, becoming hermaphroditic or completely female. If deer keep eating the leaves, a young plant takes many years to change and bear fruit, if ever. It reverts to male in years when resources are scarce.

The spathe does more than conceal: it traps flies and fungus gnats. The inner wall is covered with slippery wax and some downward-pointing hairs. In male flowers a hole at the bottom of the spathe lets insects escape, carrying pollen. In female flowers there is no hole, so insects covered in pollen from another flower dust the stigmas and die. (No, they are not digested.)

This plant fills the mouths of unwary humans with burning needles. Eaten raw, all parts contain poisonous calcium oxalate. Somehow, though, black bear and deer munch the corms, and turkey, wood thrush, and ring-necked pheasant eat the berries with no trouble.

### WILDFLOWER #32

**Clues:** This member of the Evening primrose family holds seeds in marvelous capsules.

