

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #35 answer: CAROLINA HORSE-NETTLE (*Solanum carolinense*)

The devil's tomato, tread-softly, sand-briar – there is no friendly name for this tough perennial – is native across most of temperate North America. It spreads in fields, roadsides, and other open sites.

Horse-nettle has deep roots, grows in any kind of soil, and spreads by rhizomes as well as seeds. Spines on the stem and the veins underneath the leaves break off in your skin if you try to pull it out. Because it resists them, herbicides often wind up selecting for it. It has spread world-wide as an agricultural pest.

You can find the star-shaped white or pale violet flowers from April to October, and the yellow fruits persist throughout winter. Each flower or plant is either perfect or male, a rare condition called androdioecy. Like many relatives in the Solanaceae, such as tomato and potato, it undergoes "buzz pollination." Bees vibrate their flight muscles at a certain frequency, stimulating the anthers to release pollen through a pore at the tip.

Imbued with solanine glycoalkaloids, every part of the plant is poisonous. Nevertheless, horse-nettle is a benefactor. In Virginia, at least 32 species of insect feed on it, from bumblebees to the caterpillar of the Riley's clearwing moth. Meadow voles and striped skunks eat the mature fruit, along with ring-necked pheasants, bobwhites, and wild turkeys.

WILDFLOWER #36

Clues: Look along field edges for a tree with blocky checkerboard bark and orange fruits.

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