

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #37 answer: VIRGINIA PINE (*Pinus virginiana*)

Rather scraggly, often short, and short-lived among prouder members of the Pinaceae, Virginia pine is still worth celebrating.

Abandon an old field, wait five to ten years, and Virginia pine arises, preparing the way for complex forests to take root. It does not require shade or much water, but protects other trees that grow up beneath it. Plant it at the site of an old coal or manganese mine, where little else can take hold, and Virginia pine begins to reclaim the land. At 90 years, young for most pine species, it is already old, ready to yield its place.

While succession progresses, Virginia pine seeds are important food for many small mammals and birds. White-tailed deer browse on it, and woodpeckers find the soft wood easy to excavate for nest holes. In new thickets, rabbits, bobwhite, and nongame birds find cover.

You can recognize this pine by its twisty, short, needles in bundles of two, with a yellowish tinge in winter. A possibly slouchy, twisty shape is another giveaway, and the red-brown bark that gets rougher, grayer, and more fissured with age. You will find a prickle on the back of each scale of the cone. Cones mature in two years but sit anywhere on the tree for up to five years. In springtime new cone scales have rosy tips.

The Cherokee would steep needles of Virginia pine in apple juice and drink the infusion to salute the wind. Whatever you drink, go ahead and offer this pine a holiday toast.

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Clues: Brilliant, densely packed berries stand out dramatically on bare branches.

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