

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #38 answer: WINTERBERRY (*Ilex verticillata*)

Winterberry might not match your idea of holly. It is most at home in swamps, wetlands, and streamsides, though it can stand dry places with enough shade. It is not a tall tree but a smallish, suckering shrub. Not prickly or tough or evergreen, its fuzzy-backed leaves drop off in the winter.

Otherwise modest, winterberry is the best of native hollies for its brilliant fruits. Its species name means "forming little whorls," but this is an illusion; the berries are simply in close-packed clusters. You might wonder why they aren't eaten by migrating birds in the fall. It turns out that they have low fat content, so are not preferred for fueling a long flight. However, the fruits have chemicals that prevent microbial decay, so they later sustain winter residents like robins and cedar waxwings, and a variety of mammals. They are poisonous to people, though.

Despite its name, winterberry fruits are not berries but drupes. A drupe is a stone fruit with a hard shell in the middle around one seed, like a peach; a berry's seeds are embedded throughout its flesh, like a tomato. Seeds only germinate after they are abraded by soil and sand and frozen to release the embryos from dormancy.

The creamy four-petaled flowers which precede the fruits are tiny; but once they bloom (after three years old), it is easy to tell female trees from male. The female flower's ovary protrudes, a green bump in the middle of four petals.

WILDFLOWER #39

Clues: This little evergreen vine in the Madder family brightens the winter woods.

