

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #40 answer: AMERICAN BLADDERNUT (*Staphylea trifolia*)

Light as paper or three-parted balloons, the capsules of American bladdernut have three lobes, each tipped with a point. They contain just air and one to four hard brown seeds. Shake them, and you might hear the ripe seeds rattle. Supposedly some native tribes used bladdernut as rattles in medicine dances.

Thriving in rich alluvial soils, American bladdernut often dangles bunches of those capsules right over a creek or river. When the capsules drop, the seeds can float downstream, to germinate far from the parent plant. To sprout, they must undergo cold for not one but two winters. The whole process takes at least 18 months.

Meanwhile, along the shore the parent plant propagates swiftly with runners and adventitious shoots, making a thicket. Birds like grouse find cover there, and the roots hold the banks against erosion.

You can identify them in winter by opposite leaf scars and whitish streaks on older stems. But if you canoe in springtime, you may discover the less often noticed but equally captivating flowers. The white, bell-shaped, fragrant flowers, with five protruding stamens, are grouped in thick dangling bouquets on the stem, giving rise to the genus name. In Latin *Staphylea* refers to clusters of grapes. Both honeybees and bumblebees pollinate these beauties, but most ovules do not develop into seeds.

WILDFLOWER #41

Clues: Distinctive three-bladed capsules festoon this twining vine.



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