

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #41 answer: WILD YAM (*Dioscorea villosa*)

The genus *Dioscorea* is named for Dioscorides, the first-century Greek botanist, pharmacologist, and physician. His tome, *De Materia Medica*, was the leading text on herbal medicine for sixteen centuries.

Despite this connection, wild yam is questionable as an herbal remedy. The tubers do contain diosgenin, which resembles estrogen and some other steroidal compounds. Herbalists still sell an extract to alleviate menopause and PMS and as a contraceptive, but the efficacy and safety have not been shown in clinical tests. Long use can scar the liver and kidneys.

Variation is the rule with this plant. The heart-shaped leaves with parallel veins (it is a monocot) appear in whorls near the ground but alternate farther up. Leaves are hairy (hence the name *villosa*) or not, stems are winged or not, roots are branched or not.

A vine is either male or female. In June and July, tiny flowers are strung in panicles along the stem of male vines. On female vines, slightly larger flowers hang in racemes from the leaf axils. Most members of this genus are tropical, and few insects take notice of wild yam in Virginia. It is pollinated by flies.

Wild yam is related to the yams you eat, but these tubers are inedible. Though small mammals and birds take shelter in its tangles, they do not eat any part or disperse it. Once the striking three-part capsules turn brown and split open, membranous wings on the flat seeds must catch the wind.

### WILDFLOWER #42

**Clues:** This lover of wet ground shows very different fronds in summer and winter.



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