

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #42 answer: SENSITIVE FERN (*Onoclea sensibilis*)

Sensitive, you might wonder, to what? This native is sensitive to cold; the fronds of spring and summer die back at first frost. It is also highly sensitive to drought, requiring soil that stays moist. In this way it is true to its origins. Paleocene fossils over 60 million years old match sensitive fern precisely. The habitat then as now was moist forest. Those trees are mostly extinct, but this fern is a dramatic survivor.

Up to 3 feet tall, the yellow-green vegetative fronds have wavy margins. They are pinnatifid—cut deeply, but not quite all the way—leaving a wing along the stipe. Unusual for ferns, the veins form not branches but nets.

When these fronds wither, they reveal brown fertile fronds, shorter, upright and tightly clustered. Packed along the narrow pinnae of the fertile fronds, leaf segments have contracted and hardened into stiff brown globes, enclosing spores. These “beads” last all winter; they won’t release spores until spring. This gives rise to the genus name, from the Greek for “closed vessel.”

In the spring, new fiddleheads of sensitive fern are also unmistakable, sprawled like pale red worms. They show you where the fern is spreading on its long-creeping, sometimes branched rhizome to form colonies. For this reason sensitive fern is useful in restoring wet habitats.

We do not usually associate insects with ferns, but several insects use this one. An aphid sucks the juices; the larvae of a sawfly eat the leaves. Caterpillars of the sensitive fern borer moth (*Papaipema inquaesita*) burrow into its stems and roots.

WILDFLOWER #43

Clues: This shrub or small tree in the Rose family has unbranched spines.

