

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #48 answer: TRAILING ARBUTUS (*Epigaea repens*)

Trailing arbutus was dubbed Mayflower, as it was the first flower to greet the Pilgrims after their fearful winter. In Virginia it blooms in very early Spring, on old banks with acidic soil and light shade. Its delicate, white to pinkish, waxy-looking flowers with slender hairy tubes exude a sweet fragrance that attracts bumblebees. To find them, you might have to lift old leaves. To smell them, you must lie flat on the ground, but it is worth the effort.

Although *Epigaea repens* meaning "creeping on the earth" looks herbaceous, it is really a trailing shrub, with evergreen leaves close to the ground. Both the leathery, net-veined leaves and the stems have short reddish-brown hairs, which give the plant a somewhat grizzled, worn look. The roots have no root hairs; rather they depend on mycorrhizae (fungi that live in and on roots) to absorb water and minerals.

The seeds have a fleshy attachment, from white placental tissue that fills the capsule. Hungry for its fats and proteins, ants carry the seeds to their nests, dispersing and planting them. This process is called myrmecochory.

Unlike ants, humans have been destructive. Nineteenth century foragers used to collect trailing arbutus, strip off the leaves, and sell the flowers on city streets. This and extreme fire sensitivity have made this plant uncommon in some places, but with luck, you can still find it in almost every county in Virginia.

### WILDFLOWER #49

**Clues:** You might mistake this woodland wildflower for a pine cone or an ear of corn.

