

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #52 answer: WILD GINGER (*Asarum canadense*)

Wild ginger rewards you for bending down. Two heart-shaped, heavily veined basal leaves sprout directly from the rhizome, close to the ground. Softly and thickly hairy, wild ginger may form beautiful mats. Scratch the rhizome to release a gingery aroma. This is not the ginger of your spice cabinet (*Zingiber officinale*), but the scent is equally exotic.

A single, oddly beautiful flower lies on or just above the ground, arising between the leaves and sometimes hidden by them. Also hairy, it has no petals. Three fused sepals form a little cup, maroon to brown on the outside, contrasting white inside. The tips may form extravagant recurving points. This shape gives it the folk name “little brown jug.”

Those “jugs,” meat-colored, warm, and invitingly low, occasionally attract ground-dwelling insects, but not for pollination. Wild ginger self-pollinates. Each seed has a nutritious, fleshy elaiosome; for this reason ants carry seeds back to their nests, planting them. Less favorable to the plant, it is an alternate food for the caterpillar of the pipevine swallowtail butterfly.

This singular beauty belongs to the Aristolochaceae, the birthwort family. Birthworts are neither monocots nor dicots, having branched off from other plant families very early in angiosperm evolution. Among the family's chemicals is aristolochic acid, which discourages herbivores and is most likely a human carcinogen. So although misguided colonists used this for spice, syrup, and candy, please never eat it!

WILDFLOWER #53

Clues: Gray-green leaves catch your eye before the little ruffled flowers bloom.



© Daniel Dentaglia