

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #55 answer: WOOD BETONY (*Pedicularis canadensis*)

You might know wood betony by a less appealing name: lousewort. *Pedicularis* does mean “louse”; somehow it was supposed that animals grazing where lousewort grows caught lice. On the other hand, *wort* denotes a plant of medicinal value—a worthy plant. In medieval Europe, people wore betony around the neck to repel evil spirits. In the Americas, the Menomini used it as a charm to seduce a lover and medicine to rekindle a marriage. An old Italian saying is that someone wonderful has “more virtues than betony.”

The gay, dense whorls of flowers, interspersed among hairy bracts, range from green-yellow to purple-red. A flower’s upper lip, curving down, might redden with time, while the lower lip, a landing platform, stays paler. Each tubular, hooded flower looks like a snapdragon, so it is no surprise that wood betony was long assigned to the figwort family.

A discovery moved this plant to the broomrape family, Orobanchaceae: wood betony is a hemiparasite. Although its softly hairy leaves do photosynthesize, it also attaches to the roots of various neighbor plants of at least 80 species, stealing food. In prairies, such theft might inhibit native grasses, encouraging diversity.

This native can clone itself, but it offers pollen to at least nine kinds of bee, ants, and a leaf beetle. Its best pollinator is the bumblebee, whose long proboscis matches the deep tube. Drawn by wood betony's nectar, the bees try mayapples in bloom nearby. There they find no nectar--but the mayapples set more fruit.

WILDFLOWER #56

Clues: White spots might spatter this plant’s lobed leaves.



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