

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #57 answer: FRINGE TREE (*Chionanthus virginicus*)

Fringe tree is as beautiful as its genus name, which means “snow flower.” In late spring, its delicate white flowers with four long slim petals hang in clusters, like a cheerleader’s pom poms. In summer, the drupes gleam blue against the dark green, glossy leaves. In the fall, the leaves turn bright yellow.

It is easy to identify in winter, too. Look for a multi-trunked small tree with opposite leaves and raised lenticels (small breathing holes) making little bumps all over the bark, which has long reddish furrows.

Almost always female and male flowers are on separate trees. Fragrant and spicy, the flowers of both kinds draw bees, their chief pollinators. Over 75 species of birds eat the fruit—bluebirds, wood thrushes, summer and scarlet tanagers, blue-headed vireos, wild turkeys, and more. Humans have been known to pickle the fruits. The leaves host the fringe-tree sallow moth and several native sphinx moths.

You can find fringe tree in almost every county in Virginia, mostly in moist, partly shaded areas. It is in the Oleaceae, the same family as ash, so it is susceptible to the Emerald Ash Borer, but infested fringe trees are more resilient than ashes. An attack triggers protective chemicals. These chemicals also imbue the tree with antibiotic and other medicinal properties.

WILDFLOWER #58

Clues: A tuft of tiny flowers charms the eye, each with four pale petals and a sunny center.

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