

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #39 answer: PARTRIDGE BERRY (*Mitchella repens*)

Linnaeus named partridge berry for his friend John Mitchell, an 18th century botanist, physician, and geographer in the American colonies. The species name means "creeping."

It is, indeed, a diminutive, prostrate, creeping wildflower that flourishes in deep shade, even under hemlocks. Shiny dark green leaves, with a light midrib, grow in pairs. Little side roots along the stems help it form mats.

It is good that partridge berry spreads vegetatively, because fertilization has an extra hurdle. The paired, fragrant, tube-shaped flowers, which appear in spring, have fuzzy white sepals and petals surrounding four stamens and one pistil. A plant has either long stamens and a short style (a thrum), or short stamens and a long style (a pin). Fertilization succeeds only if there is a cross between a thrum and a pin. No one has yet explained this condition, called *distyly*.

Bumblebees carry pollen between flowers. When both flowers are fertilized, their ovaries fuse to form a single berry-like drupe. You can find the remains of both stigmas as holes or dots on the fruit.

You can eat the scarlet fruits, but they are not sweet or flavorful. Indeed, they are not a favorite of most herbivores, so they often last through winter. Eventually, they might be eaten by ruffed grouse (which some call "partridges"), turkeys, foxes, skunks, and a few others.

WILDFLOWER #40

Clues: Seek the unique inflated capsules of this shrub or small tree near a river.

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