

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #63 answer: **BUTTONBUSH** (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*)

This wetland shrub is not buttoned-down but lavish in its gifts. The Latin name means “western head,” and the head-shaped inflorescence is unique. Up to 200 dense-packed flowers form a shining sphere, each corolla fused into a slender tube with four lobes. The stigmas stick out, like a pincushion or a sputnik.

Crowded, the flowers still avoid self-pollination. Anthers hide deep in the base of each flower. As the pistil grows past them, the stigma picks up pollen, to which it is not receptive. Instead, it thrusts the pollen outside, where pollinators relay it to other plants. Left-over pollen seldom succeeds in fertilizing a plant’s own ovules.

Buttonbush well deserves its other name, honey-balls. By moonlight moths gather; by day long-tongued bees, swallowtail butterflies, beetles, and hummingbirds join the party. Meanwhile, the glossy foliage feeds larvae of the hydrangea sphinx moth, titan sphinx moth, pink-spotted hawk moth, Promethea moth, and more.

Not fazed by flooding, buttonbush doesn’t mind roots permanently underwater. You can propagate it by just sticking a cutting into mud, and you can use it to stabilize a bank. Yet it also tolerates being planted on dry sites—where it is a good substitute for invasive shrubs like burning bush or Japanese barberry.

Best, buttonbush is a friend to wetland birds. Its clonal thickets make nest sites for yellow warblers and common yellowthroats, and cover for wood ducks, alder flycatchers, and red-winged blackbirds. In the fall, when each flower head has become a hard red globe, up to 400 nutlets shake loose over the water. Waterfowl—among them Virginia rail, American bittern, blue-winged and green-winged teal, gadwall, ring-necked duck, American wigeon, northern pintail, and northern shoveler—come to feast.

WILDFLOWER #64

Clues: This wetland shrub has a flamboyant, musky, five-petaled flower.



© Martin LaBar



© Andrew Cannizzaro