

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #71 answer: COW PARSNIP (*Heracleum maximum*)

Heracles, the larger-than-life superhero of ancient Greece, traveled the world, performing impossible deeds with maximum strength. His name befits this only native *Heracleum* in North America. It flourishes from Atlantic to Pacific, from sea level to 9000 feet, though in Virginia it is mostly in the mountains. It can grow 8 feet tall, its rough three-parted leaves can measure 20 inches across, and its flat umbels (umbrella-like flower heads characteristic of the family) are up to 8 inches wide.

Only a rosette the first year, our native *Heracleum* shoots up the next year to become a valuable part of the ecosystem. It is an important food for wild animals including elk, deer, grizzly bears, and black bears; cows, sheep, horses, and goats eat it too. It feeds diverse pollinators: at least six groups of bees, plus wasps, beetles, butterflies, flies, and gnats galore.

First peoples traveled far to find it in the spring. They made poultices for bruises from the roots. They peeled the stout central stem, coarse-haired, hollow, and ridged, eating it raw, while European settlers cooked it, calling it Indian celery or Indian rhubarb. Back in the fifth century A.D., cow parsnip or a very close relative gave its Proto-Slavic name to the first borscht. Far better to stick with beets, but if you must try it, be certain to get this species and not its relative, the deadly nonnative poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) with its spotted stem.

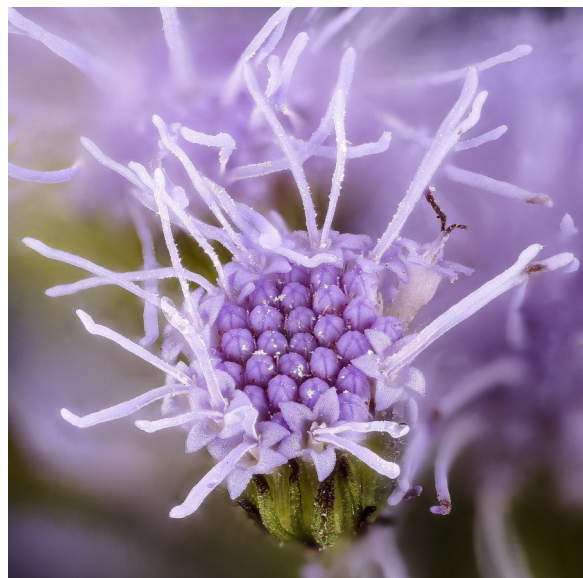
The benign cow parsnip is also often confused with its even bigger nonnative cousin, giant hogweed, *H. mantegazzianum*. This invasive monster is not yet found in the wild in Virginia. Both plants protect themselves with furanocoumarins, antimicrobial chemicals that also intensify sensitivity to sunlight. Giant hogweed burns are much more severe. Just play it safe, and don't touch the clear sap of either plant.

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Clues: A purple-blue shimmer brightens the late-summer meadow.



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