

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #79 answer: FIELD THISTLE (*Cirsium campestris*)

Our native field thistle is much more benign than its formidable European relative. Whereas bull thistle is an invader here, field thistle is often included in restorations of North American prairies and wildflower meadows. There is no ouchless way to take hold of bull thistle, which has spines all along its stalk; but our native field thistle has spines on its leaves only. You can recognize field thistle readily by just flipping over one of its deeply lobed leaves, revealing a woolly white underside. This difference is its “*discoloration*.”

A field thistle flower head is a community of disk flowers, with no ray flowers—you might say it is “totally tubular.” In most photographs, an insect is poking into the tubes for bountiful nectar and pollen. Migrating monarch butterflies seek this plant, and it is a host for painted lady butterfly larvae. Ruby-throated hummingbirds dip into the tubes for nectar, while eastern goldfinches wait to devour the seeds. Goldfinches also line their late-season nests with the tufts of soft hair that send seeds aloft in the wind.

The spines keep most mammals at bay, though humans sometimes boil the young stems to eat. (This is after all in the same subfamily as artichokes.) Field thistle might ward off other things too. Chinese herbalists have used a closely related plant for centuries, and in recent studies it seems to inhibit carcinomas and liver disease.

### WILDFLOWER #80

**Clues:** This crowd-surfer slings a tangled web from plant to plant.



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