

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #86 answer: SPOTTED WINTERGREEN (*Chimaphila maculata*)

The common and scientific names of this plant mean the same thing: *Chimaphila* means “winter-loving,” and *maculata* means “spotted,” for the flowers. An alternate common name is Striped wintergreen, for the white-striped evergreen leaves.

On a bare forest floor in winter, the thick white midvein and thin white side veins are eye-catching; but Spotted wintergreen stays safe, as chemicals discourage deer from browsing. Small mammals avoid it, too—a third name is Ratsbane. The same chemicals might prove to protect humans against arthritis, osteoporosis, and urinary tract infections, though most researchers are using a sister species, Pipsissewa (*C. umbellata*).

In summer, a cluster of fragrant white to pink flowers hangs downward on the reddish, somewhat woody stem. Five subtly speckled petals arch backward, forming an upside-down cup like a little crown, suggesting a fourth name, Spotted prince’s pine. When bumble bees shake them by buzzing, the pale pink anthers shed pollen through pores at the tips. They share this “buzz pollination” with many other members of the Ericaceae.

By fall, the stem straightens, so the ovary turns from face down to face up. The capsule, which looks like a neat brown turban, will split to disperse seeds on the wind. The tiny triangular seeds are hard to germinate in cultivation, perhaps because they require mycorrhizae. The plant mostly spreads by rhizomes.

An indigenous people in Mexico depends on the prevalence of Striped wintergreen. It is a catalyst in brewing tesguino, a corn-based beer used in sacred rituals.

WILDFLOWER #87

Clues: This crooked tree is at home on a rocky precipice.



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