

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #91 answer: **TEABERRY** (*Gaultheria procumbens*)

Teaberry is aptly named in Latin for Jean Francois Gaultier, a physician-botanist in 18th century Quebec, where he saw first nations use it. Teaberry oil contains methyl salicylate, closely related to aspirin. It was a remedy for pain and colds among the Algonquin, Cherokee, Chippewa, and Iroquois. New uses are under study.

As the common name tells you, the low-growing, leathery, evergreen leaves make an aromatic tea. The plant is also called wintergreen, because of the minty aroma of all its parts and the minty flavor of its fruits, which humans can eat. Extract of teaberry has long been used to flavor candy, ice cream, and even Clark's Teaberry chewing gum.

Lasting all winter, teaberry's fruits feed wild turkey, bobwhite, black bear, red fox, white-footed mice, and more. They are a favorite food of chipmunks. Deer also enjoy them, so teaberry is less common where the deer population is high. At least the oil is insecticidal, so few insects nibble the leaves.

Harvested for oil by the bushel into the 20th century, teaberry still survives to brighten the winter forest floor. However, it is vulnerable. Teaberry does not reproduce well by seed. Like most other buzz-pollinated plants, even when bumblebees visit, it sets few seeds. Fortunately, it can reproduce abundantly from belowground buds on long rhizomes. Asexual reproduction is critical; plowing will destroy a population for good.

Like most plants in the Heath family (Ericaceae), teaberry grows best in acid soil and in cool climates. Look for it forming dense patches in pine woods. In the summer, stoop down to admire the flowers. They are dainty white to pinkish bells hanging on stalks just under a cluster of dark green, oval leaves. The stamens end in small forked appendages.

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Clues: This delicious vine hitchhikes on a tree.



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