

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #18 Answer: **WILD SENNA** (*Senna hebecarpa*)

Wild senna blooms enthusiastically, with many flowers in each raceme and a fuzzy legume. Find it in a field, and sleepy orange butterflies, whose larvae prefer it, will almost always be near. It also plays host to caterpillars of numerous other species.

Senna is one of a group of plants that produce nectar outside the flowers. The function is not pollination but protection: nectar attracts ants who eat herbivores. Nectaries evolved on sennas about 30 million years ago, after ants. On *Senna hebecarpa* you can find a club-shaped gland on the petiole at the base of each leaf.

Because wild senna only grows in full sun and moist soil, it becomes rare where fields undergo succession and ditches are drained. This has put it on the endangered plant list in most New England states. Even in southern fields, rampant Japanese stilt grass suppresses it. Many plants block self-fertilization, but not wild senna, so small populations risk becoming inbred.

The leaves and fruits contain chemicals called anthraquinones. Also present in aloe, buckthorn, and rhubarb, these are natural pigments and potent laxatives. Perhaps they inhibit grazing by deer, though butterfly larvae do not mind them. Neither do bobwhite quail and wild turkeys, who enjoy the square seeds in the fall.

WILDFLOWER #19

Clues: This wispy grass lends a purple haze to a whole field when it is blooming.

