VNPS Piedmont Chapter
WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #33 answer: SHINING SUMAC (*Rhus copallinum*)

ñTorches of sumac are blazing in splendor,ò says an old song. When its dark green leaves turn crimson, colonies of Shining sumac stand out along roadsides and in old fields. No wonder some people call it Flameleaf sumac. Another name is Winged sumac, for the ñwingò tissue between leaflets on the central stalk.

Shining sumac has gifts for animals, humans, and the land itself. Like all sumacs it is an important pollinator plant, attracting a wide diversity of bees, wasps, beetles, and flies. Sumacs are critical hosts for red-banded hairstreak butterflies.

On female plants, clusters of green-yellow flowers turn into tight panicles of hairy reddish fruits. Persisting all winter, they feed birds including wild turkeys and songbirds. Deer browse the twigs in winter, and rabbits gnaw bark and twigs.

Human foragers use the fruits to make lemonade. Experiments are under way to extract chemicals that might have anticancer and antimicrobial activity. In Appalachia, the leaves and bark used to be gathered and sold to tanners. They called sumac ñshoe-make.ò

Shining sumac thrives even on dry, rocky, or serpentine soils. It is a pyrophyte ï a plant that thrives with frequent fires. The roots survive a fire, sending up sprouts afterwards. Fire scarifies the seeds, improving germination. Brownfield restoration ecologists use it to soak up zinc, chromium, and copper from waste sites.

WILDFLOWER #34

Clues: Look upward to find this native shrub clasping its host tree.