

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #45 answer: HACKBERRY (*Celtis occidentalis*)

To identify hackberry, you need look no further than the bark, which is lumpy as a bowl of oatmeal; but look also for dense clumps of short twigs. These witch's brooms do no harm. They are the work of a powdery mildew fungus plus a wormlike mite a mere 200 microns long. 2000 of them fit into a bud. Hackberry's pointy, toothed leaves with uneven bases are marked by other colonists: four gall-making insects and the larvae of the Hackberry Emperor butterfly.

Hackberry is now in the Cannabaceae, the family of hops and marijuana, though it does not share their effects. Before that it was in the family of American elm, whose place it often takes in forests and on city streets. It is at home in floodplains and other moist places (perhaps taking its name from the Celtic word for marsh), but it adapts to salt, drought, heat, wind, ice, and varied soils. In Virginia, it is very common in old hedgerows.

The durable hackberry nurtures a wide range of wild animals. The berries (actually drupes), which turn from green to orange to dark purple, often last the winter. They are especially high in fat, carbohydrates, and protein. Birds from wild turkeys to cedar waxwings and mammals from mice to bears enjoy them.

With species around the world, *Celtis* has also nourished human history. Fruits from a species of hackberry were stored in the tomb of Peking Man 500,000 years ago making them one of the oldest confirmed human foods. Archeologists have found ancient caches of the fruits in Indonesia, Turkey, South Africa, Peru, and elsewhere. In North America many First Nations have relied on them, and foragers still gather them today.

WILDFLOWER #46

Clues: This small rock-loving fern has once-cut fronds.

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