

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #49 answer: BEAR CORN (*Conophilis americana*)

Bear corn flourishes without photosynthesis – it has no chlorophyll and no true leaves. It belongs to the Broomrape family, the Orobanchaceae, who steal food from other plants. Bear corn is a parasite on the roots of large red or black oaks and maybe beech. It is a holoparasite, meaning it has no other nourishment. It has no roots, either. Rather it attaches to tree roots via a mass of tissue called a *haustorium*. It only grows on trees that have mycorrhizal fungi.

You can trace the spread of a host tree's roots by noticing where bear corn arises. Underground, big knobs develop on the host's roots; this earns it the name cancer root.

A cluster of new inflorescences appears in early spring, perhaps among blackened remnants of last year's growth. All you see is a stalk crowded with creamy yellowish tubular flowers, which poke out horizontally, facing down. Instead of leaves, there are half-inch long brown scales at the base of each flower. At first resembling a pine cone, this stalk can grow up to 8 inches tall.

Breaking more rules, a bear corn flower has no nectar and no fragrance. For the most part, it simply self-pollinates. Each pollinated flower yields a fat white seed capsule, which looks like a kernel of corn. A plant might bear 100,000 tiny seeds. These have no food reserves, but fall, attach thready rootlike haustoria to the host, and begin to fatten. After four or five years, a tubercle puts up a flowering stalk. If tubercles are too draining, the host might put out extra tannin to poison them.

Bears rousing from hibernation seek bear corn in fruit; it is high in fiber, a natural laxative, and full of vitamins. Despite its bitterness, coyotes, raccoons, deer, and small mammals eat it, too, dispersing the seeds in scat.

WILDFLOWER #50

Clues: White flowers rise from a stone ledge in very early spring.



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