

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER OF THE WEEK

WILDFLOWER #51 answer: MARSH MARIGOLD (*Caltha palustris*)

The gorgeous marsh marigold is not a marigold, though its sepals (it has no petals) glow golden yellow. It does love marshes, but not standing water. It grows in wet habitats from floodplain forests to open meadows, spreading by seed in forests and by runners in the meadows, where it has a lot of competition.

This species is old and far-flung. *Caltha palustris* seeds were found in the colon of an 18,000-year-old mammoth preserved in permafrost in northern Siberia. It ranges through the northern hemisphere, from the mountains of Tennessee, Spain, and India all the way up to the Arctic, but in parts of the southern United States, it is becoming rare.

Like all members of its family, the buttercups, its multiple parts are not fused together—there are numerous stamens and carpels (an ovary with stigma and style). The name *Caltha* comes from the Greek *kalathos*, meaning goblet, which describes the overall flower shape. Its nectar and abundant pollen attract a wide variety of pollinators, who are eagerly seeking food in early spring.

Marsh marigold is adapted to water in many ways. The heart-shaped lower leaves are long-stalked and waxy, and the stems are hollow. Waterproof winter buds lurk just below the surface of wet soil. The fruits form a cluster of beaked follicles, which split open to form a “splash cup”; raindrops knock the seeds into water. The seeds themselves have spongy tissue that helps them float away.

Traditionally, marsh marigold was strewn across the threshold of cottages, woven into garlands, and gathered for festivals to honor the Virgin Mary, whose name might be the *mari-* of marigold. Today, scientists are trying to generate bioelectricity by growing it under the right conditions with *Lumbricus terrestris* earthworms.

WILDFLOWER #52

Clues: This spicy beauty lies low on the forest floor.

