

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #56 answer: VIRGINIA WATERLEAF (*Hydrophyllum virginianum*)

Spring leaves of Virginia waterleaf have white spatters as they age, making them appear water-stained; hence the Latin and common names. The fleshy petioles are juicy, another explanation of the name. The vigorous early leaves die back, but a new flush of plain green leaves arrives in late summer, feeding the rhizomes for next spring.

The calyx is long-haired, and extravagantly hairy stamens stick way out, seeming to wrap the flower head in a soft mist. A cluster of 8 to 20 flowers, radiating in a sphere, give the impression of froth at the end of a bare stem; but look closely – each flower is a tiny purplish bell.

The flowers attract various long-tongued bee pollinators, including *Andrena geranii*, a specialist on the genus. Besides seeds, waterleaf spreads by rhizomes to form large, dense colonies in moist woods. They help prevent soil erosion.

The range of Virginia waterleaf is contracting on all sides. It is much more common on land that has never been grazed or farmed. The white spots camouflage plants against the dappled forest understory. Even so, waterleaf grows taller and flowers better when it is protected outright from deer.

Historically, humans browsed too. Original peoples of the Americas and peoples of Nigeria both have treated species of waterleaf as a vegetable.

WILDFLOWER #57

Clues: A cloud of strappy petals haloes this member of the Olive family.

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