

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #59 answer: FLY POISON (*Amianthium muscitoxicum*)

Fly poison's enchanting flower head is a column with hundreds of white star-shaped flowers, which turn bronze-green. In such a crowd, what prevents self-pollination? Fly poison has two tricks. Flowers open in sequence, from bottom to top, so pollen can't fall onto a stigma below. Even if it did, pollen is not compatible between flowers of the same column. Beetles and a few other insects carry pollen off to another plant.

Fly poison has parallel veins and parts in threes, which makes it a monocot. It was recently moved from the Lily family to the Bunchflower family (Melanthiaceae). In lilies, the styles (which hold up the receptive female stigma) are fused; in bunchflowers, they spread apart at the top.

You might mistake it for another bunchflower: Eastern turkeybeard (*Xerophyllum asphodelioides*). Fly poison's straplike leaves are not quite so narrow, and its flower head is more columnar.

Although a beauty, this plant earns its disturbing name in both English and Latin. (*Musca* means fly, and *toxicum* means poisonous.) All parts of the plant are protected by highly toxic alkaloids. Livestock shun fly poison; if forage is so scarce that they must eat it, they get "the staggers" and might die. European settlers, whose cabins had no window glass, ground it up with sugar water to attract and kill flies.

Fly poison is a survivor, thriving after fire or heavy logging. After the last ice age, populations migrated outward from various refuges. Now scattered, widely separated populations tell the story of a comeback.

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Clues: This sunny charmer masquerades as grass until six-parted flowers bloom.



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