

## VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

### WILDFLOWER #61 answer: VENUS' LOOKING GLASS (*Triodanus perfoliata*)

The alluring name of this native annual is a source of puzzlement—outsized for such a small plant, and otherwise inapt. It is said that seeds of its European cousin gleam like mirrors, but this species has such tiny seeds, you would be hard pressed to catch a shine. Indeed, the seeds are too small for birds to eat, so they are spread by wind. Perhaps this commoner is just divinely beautiful: a miniature purple bellflower, with five petals fused into a tube and streaked with darker purple to usher pollinators into its creamy throat.

The Latin name is also an oddity. *Triodanus* means “three toothed,” but there are five joined petals, five pointy sepals, and five stamens. The seed capsule has three pores, not projections. The white pistil does end in three round lobes; are they somewhat like baby teeth? *Perfoliata* completes the puzzle: the scalloped leaves, crammed alternately along a grooved stem, clasp it (like Venus embracing a lover?), but do not surround it all the way.

This namesake of Venus does not even rely on sex. It does entice carpenter bees, green metallic bees, bumblebees, and butterflies. The fascinating Plasterer bee *Colletes brevicornis* seems to prefer this nectar above all others, carrying it to “cellophane-wrapped” underground egg chambers. But this story of pollination holds only for flowers in the plant’s upper axils. Flowers in the lower half never open; they are *cleistogamous*, or self-pollinating.

Venus’ looking glass does spread its favors widely, often in areas too poor for most other plants: field edges, sandy roadsides, gravel paths. The flowers in each axil take turns to bloom, so you can enjoy it from May through July. But Venus does not want to see herself age. When the last bloom fades, the plant disappears.

### WILDFLOWER #62

**Clues:** This delicious wildflower blooms on thorny pads.



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