

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #65 answer: FAIRY CANDLES (*Actaea racemosa*)

Towering over other members of the Buttercup family, fairy candles grows up to 8 feet tall, lifting a branched, curvy, two-foot-long wand of flowers above compound leaves in threes. It lends an other-worldly glow to dark woods in every county of Virginia.

The Roman naturalist Pliny called the genus *Actaea*, a name recently restored despite the awkward fact that the rest of the genus produces berries, but fairy candles' fruit is a follicle. In the fall, seeds rattle in their dry black veined case, before it splits open.

You might remember the former name *Cimicifuga*—literally, a plant from which “lice flee.” This matches the common name black bugbane, so called because humans find the flowers faintly fetid. Rather than driving bugs away, though, the hint of carrion attracts a large variety of small pollinators, such as bees, flies, beetles, and the red admiral butterfly.

The flowers of fairy candles open along the stalk from the bottom up, so they won't self-pollinate. Surprisingly, they have no petals, and the few small sepals wither and fall off shortly after the flower opens. What remains is a cloud of 55 to 110 anthers surrounding a white pistil. Larvae of the Appalachian azure, a small, light blue butterfly, hatch on the globed flower buds, eating buds and leaves and shunning other plants. The sweet sap (or honeydew) they excrete attracts ants, who protect the caterpillars from carnivorous insects.

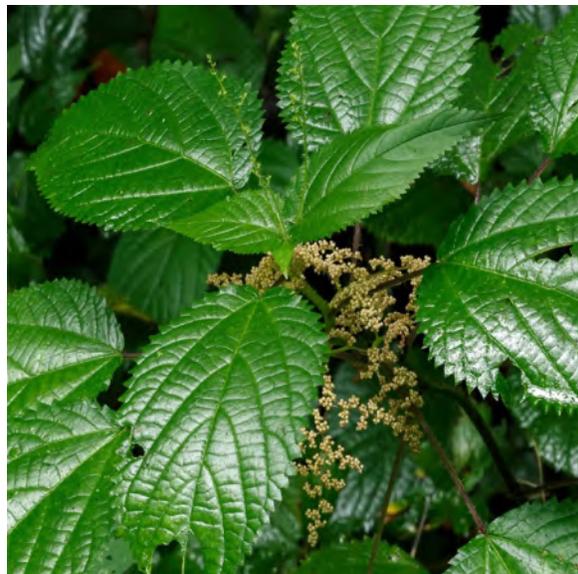
The good news for this native is that deer are not attracted; the bad news is that humans are. Whole populations are threatened by overharvesting. Containing estrogen-like isoflavones, they are a folk remedy for hot flashes. Clinical research in the United States does not confirm this effect, and impurities can make it dangerous. Far better to leave fairy candles to glow intact.

WILDFLOWER #66

Clues: This well-defended native has two quite different kinds of flowers.



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