VNPS Piedmont Chapter
WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #66 answer: WOOD NETTLE (*Laportea canadensis*)

Laportea is named for a 19th century French naturalist, François Louis Nompar de Caumont Laporte, Comte de Castelnau—an elegant namesake for a commoner plant.

The key to telling wood nettle from the introduced stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) is that some wood nettle leaves are alternate. False nettle (*Boehmeria cylindrica*), a friendlier look-alike, also is opposite-leaved, and it lacks stinging hairs.

The stiff white hairs cover the leaves, which are wrinkly when new. Each hair is a marvel, a pointy single cell with walls of silica, ending in a bulb. It is a miniature glass hypodermic needle, set to inject histamine, serotonin, and formic acid. No wonder big mammals avoid wood nettle, while smaller creatures find refuge beneath it. Deer eat plants with fewer stings, pushing populations to become more hairy.

Approaching with respect, you will discover two kinds of flowers sharing one plant. Female flowers are like greenish, curly leaves; they grow in flat clusters near the top of the plant, where wind picks up pollen. Male flowers are whitish; they hang lower down, in loose bunches in the axils.

Though nettles give insects no nectar or pollen, they do host the larvae of butterflies and moths, such as the Eastern Comma, Question Mark, and Red Admiral. Gall-forming insects induce round, berry-like galls on the leaves and female flowers. These pale galls are unlike the shiny black seeds, which hang from female flowers like earrings on a rack.

Wood nettle has helped humans too. Young nettles, well boiled, are a spring tonic. Fiber from the stem makes nets and cords up to fifty times as strong as cotton.

WILDFLOWER #67

Clues: This deep-rooted sun-lover has brilliant orange-yellow flowers.