

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #70 answer: LIZARD'S TAIL (*Saururus cernuus*)

Most flowers in racemes stand up straight, but lizard's tail's bloomstalk dips, the way a lizard lets its flexible tail hang down. Depicting this curve, the genus name combines *sauros* for lizard with *urus* for tail, and *cernuus* for nodding.

Lizard's tail is an obligate wetland species, meaning that it always has its feet in very wet soil or shallow water. The aromatic flowers arise from long leaves with heart-shaped bases, whose petioles wrap around the stem. You seldom find a plant alone; it spreads by rhizomes, forming dense colonies. It provides wood ducks with plenty of cover, unless beavers have feasted on it. It is a favorite food of the beavers, who can reduce the cover by half or more.

Both wind and insects take part in pollination, though wind results in more seed set. Look closely at the aromatic, all-white inflorescence and you will get a surprise. The flowers are stripped to basics: they have no petals and no sepals, nothing but stamens and pistils. The pistils ripen first. Then the stamens get taller, which helps get pollen into the wind, especially when a landing insect shakes it.

The filament (the thready part of the stamen, which holds up the anther) entices insects with ultraviolet patterns. A wide variety of insects comes to lizard's tail. One study in Maryland counted 29 species of beetles in four days. Several of the beetles were mating, so you might call the flowers a beetle speed-dating site.

Lizard's tail also produces intriguing chemicals. Some appear to deter hungry crayfish. Others have potential for treating solid cancers, such as breast cancer.

WILDFLOWER #71

Clues: This gentle giant has huge leaves and umbels.

