

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #74 answer: LATE FIGWORT (*Scrophularia marilandica*)

You might have learned that square stems signal the mint family, but here is an exception to the rule. Late figwort, which can stand five to ten feet tall, has a square, stout, ridged stalk, covered with dark glandular hairs. Its exact corners earned it the name “carpenter’s square.”

This plant was once known as “heal-all.” In the 19th century it was used to treat insomnia and anxiety. The common name “figwort” refers to its historic use to treat piles (hemorrhoids), which used to be called “figs.” The genus name matches the family name, the Scrophulariaceae. Scrofula was tuberculosis of the lymph nodes in the neck. Widespread in the Middle Ages, it was also called “The King’s Evil,” because people thought the royal touch would cure it. Possibly the bumps on figwort’s rhizomes resemble a sufferer’s swellings.

For such a large plant, the flowers on their upright branches are unassuming. They are also quite odd—tiny, green-brown on the outside, and red-purple on the inside. There are five lobes, the top two sticking up, the middle bottom pouting. The cuplike opening has been described as “a horse’s mouth with an overbite.” The “teeth” are really four fat yellow stamens and one blunt style. A sterile purple stamen lurks deeper inside.

The Xerces Society praises figworts for special value to insects. Beekeepers in Illinois once estimated that an acre of late figwort flowers would give them 400 to 800 pounds of honey. A cornucopia of nectar, the flower attracts large numbers of native bees and butterflies, as well as wasps who prey on pest insects. It is also an excellent sugar source for hummingbirds when they are migrating. Mammals keep away, though, deterred by acrid compounds in the leaves.

WILDFLOWER #75

Clues: A short wand shines paler than its sister species.

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