

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #88 answer: COMMON RUSH (*Juncus effusus*)

“Sedges have edges, rushes are round. Grasses are hollow down to the ground.” There are many versions of this poem, but all of them contrast the triangular shape of sedge stems (Cyperaceae) with the round shape of rush stems (Juncaceae). Grass stems are round but hollow, with multiple leaves arising at nodes. Common rush (or soft rush, though not much is soft about it) is solid and leafless, though leaflike sheaths, papery red-brown, wrap the stem near the base.

This rush’s one-sided cluster of flowers appears to spring from the side of the stem, but don’t be fooled; it is actually at the top. The apparent continuation of the stem is a pointy bract. The small, brown flowers have all the usual flower parts: six tepals, three stamens, and three stigmas. In winter, you can break open a capsule to release three net-veined seeds.

Common rush is a runaway success story; it grows around the world, almost always in wet sites and always in full sun. Colonies spread from thick rhizomes. Breezes carry pollen, or the flowers self-pollinate. Rabbits chew the dense-packed stems, but few other mammals do, not even the ravenous muskrat. This makes the plant valuable in wetland restorations, where it provides cover and seeds for small animals and birds.

Humans have peeled the spongy pith to form a wick for an oil lamp; or soaked it in melted fat and cooled it to make a candle, leaving a strip of epidermis for rigidity. You can weave the stems into mats, baskets, and bracelets. Rushes used to be strewn on dirt floors to insulate and to keep down dust. It is rumored that in Ireland common rush was used to make crosses on February 1, the feast of Saint Brigid.

WILDFLOWER #89

Clues: This year-round fern is named for a winter holiday.

© Doug McGrady



© Sandra Richard