

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #92 answer: WILD GRAPE (*Vitis spp.*)

This unruly native has long befriended humans. People began fermenting wild grapes at least 7000 years ago in Turkey, and worshipped gods and goddesses of the vine in ancient Rome, Greece, Sumer, Egypt, and China. The Vikings, first Europeans to land in North America, saw abundant grapes and called our continent Vinland. Today foragers make wild grape jelly and gather the leaves for dolmas. You can eat wild grapes right off the vine from fall through winter, though most are small and tangy. Grapes and their extracts have antioxidant and antibacterial properties.

The purple-black fruits feed a multitude of birds and mammals too, especially jays and black bears. Birds nest in tangles of grape, using the shreddy gray-brown bark as nest material. Sphinx moth larvae depend on the leaves.

There are over 60 kinds of wild grapes; our *Flora of Virginia* admits that they are “taxonomically difficult” and describes seven. They all cling by tendrils, arising opposite palmately veined, toothy leaves. Modified flower clusters, tendrils use internal water pressure to respond to touch. Encountering a twig, they bend into a coil, take hold, and rise with the sapling—up to 100 feet. It takes strong pressure to send water so high; cut a stem as the vine prepares to leaf out, and water pours forth.

Vines might stretch across the canopy to embrace neighbor trees. This only becomes bad for a tree if they overload with snow or ice.

In late spring, five greenish petals will join in a sort of cap that pops off as each flower stretches open. Sweat bees and wasps will pollinate the single pistil, exposed amid five stamens.

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Clues: A hint of licorice lingers all winter long.



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