

“Great Chickweed” by Jill McNealy

Great Chickweed, *Stellaria pubera* is one of my favorite wildflowers. I must make that perfectly clear at the beginning of this article. It is one of the most delicate flowers we have. Its flowers appear in April or May on stems 6 to 8 inches tall, with many blossoms on each plant. The flower has what appears to be a flat disk of ten individual petals, but is really a deeply cleft disk that makes it look like a star. Hence the common name of Star Chickweed. Grazing animals take advantage of the fact that the tender shoots are a good source of copper, and the Europeans gather it as a salad green, treating it like watercress. Another method of preparing Chickweed is to boil it. Some say it is like cooked spinach. Because it is high in vitamins A and C it has been used to treat scurvy, the disease that was the plague to sailors in centuries past. It was also used to make poultices for boils.

You can also use chickweed as a barometer. This is something you can try if you would like to see if the rain is going to fall in the next hour or so. The sun will cause the petals to spread out. If the petals close up, rain is imminent. You can see Chickweed along the path bordering the two ponds in our own Rockingham Springs Arboretum, as well as in Shenandoah National Park along the fire road south of Pocosin.

The plantain-leaved Pussytoe is a member of the Aster family. It looks quite similar to a cat's paw and is soft like a kitten's soft fur. The Pussytoes one finds along the way are often flourishing by themselves in large communities next to the trail. The plant not only thrives in poorer soils, it releases a substance that other plants find objectionable. This stops other vegetation from crowding too close.

Botanists disagree as to how many species of Pussytoes exist. Some say there are no more than six - others put the number as high as thirty. Although the Pussytoe is easy to identify, picking out a particular species is not so simple. One, for example, favors the trail-side environment and is small with narrow leaves. Other differences in this species are not so easy to recognize.

Jill