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**Wildflower Spot – February 2011**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## WILD YAM

*Dioscorea villosa*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This low, creeping perennial vine is usually found wild in the eastern half of North America. Wild yam can be recognized in winter by the greenish-gold, 3-winged capsules with very wide, winged seeds. The alternate leaves are heart-shaped at the base, long-pointed, and with prominent veins. Leaf edges are smooth, and the lower ones occur in whorls of three. In spring small, greenish-yellow flowers hang in drooping spikes – the flowers are much smaller than the fruits which come later. The male and female flowers are in separate clusters.

Wild yam can be found in moist open woods, thickets, and roadsides. The plant will grow in poor soils and full sun. Found in nearly every county in Virginia, it ranges from Connecticut and New York to Minnesota, and south to Florida and Texas. Flowers appear in April through July.

American Indians used root tea to relieve labor pains. A tea made from fresh dried root was formerly used by physicians to various conditions. Most of the steroid hormones used in modern medicine, especially those



in contraceptives, were developed from elaborately processed chemical components derive from members of the yam family. Although recently marketed as a source of estrogen or progesterone, wild yam root does not contain human sex hormones. The fresh plant may induce vomiting and other undesirable side effects. (Foster and Duke, *Medicinal Plant and Herbs.*)❖

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**Photo:** Wild Yam (*Dioscorea villosa*) taken by Phillip Merritt  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).