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**Wildflower Spot – June 2015**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## WATER PENNYWORT

*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

The leaves of Pennywort are often seen floating on the water's surface, attached to 4-12-inch stems which root at the nodes. With 5 or 6 lobes, the leaves resemble those of buttercups, hence the species name *ranunculoides*, meaning "like *Ranunculus*." The petiole attaches at the bottom of a deep cleft almost at the middle of the blade. Small white or greenish flowers appear in a flat-topped group (umbel) at the end of a short stalk from April through July.

The flowers are followed by dry fruits (achenes) that can float on water and distribute the plant to new locations. Fine fibrous roots that penetrate the soil or drift in the water allow Water Pennywort to form large dense colonies in muddy soil or shallow water.

Pennyworts are common in swamps, marshes, ditches and wet soils from New England and south to Florida and Texas, western U.S. and tropical America, but grow only in the eastern counties of Virginia.

Two related species are common on the Coastal Plain, both with the petioles attaching at the



center of the circular, sometimes lobed, but not cleft leaves: *H. umbellata* has one umbel of 10 or more flowers; in *H. verticillata* several clusters of 7 or fewer flowers are in whorls along the flower stem.

The genus name *Hydrocotyle* is derived from the Greek *hydro*, "water," and *cotyle*, "a flat cup," referring to the leaves of some species being somewhat cup-shaped. ❖

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**Photo:** Water Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*) taken by Helen Hamiton  
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