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## Wildflower Spot – July 2017

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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### YELLOW WILD INDIGO

*Baptisia tinctoria*

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

Bright yellow pea-shaped flowers cover this shrubby wildflower from April through August. The mound of foliage grows 2-3 feet tall on many-branched stems carrying silvery green 3-parted leaves. After the flowers fade they are replaced by inflated seedpods that are attractive in indoor arrangements.

Yellow Wild Indigo is easy to grow in average, well-drained soil, in full sun or light shade. Young plants may not flower vigorously since they expend much energy developing strong taproots. During the third year the upper half of the plant will produce more blossoms. Most native plants do not show good development for three years: “first they sleep, then they creep, then they leap.” Once established, Yellow Wild Indigo is a durable and long-lived perennial and will

tolerate drought and poor soils. Found in every county in Virginia, the range extends from southern Maine to Georgia and Tennessee.

The showy flowers attract butterflies and other pollinators, and the leaves host the caterpillars of the Wild Indigo Duskywing and Silver-spotted Skipper. The foliage is pest resistant, and distasteful to deer and rabbits. Yellow Wild Indigo is a member of the Pea Family, and as a legume, the roots contain bacteria that fix



nitrogen, enriching the soils where they grow. This is a good choice for a wildlife or cottage garden or a dry meadow. The yellow flowers look wonderful when planted with orange Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), and purple and white asters.

Native Americans used the plant for various medicinal purposes; studies have shown the extract stimulates the immune system. Yellow Wild Indigo was used by early

Americans as a substitute for true indigo (genus *Indigofera*) in making dyes. *Baptisia* comes from the Greek word for “dye” and *tinctoria* is derived from the Latin word for “dye.” ❖

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**Photo:** Yellow Wild Indigo (*Baptisia tinctoria*) taken by Helen Hamilton  
For more information about native plants visit [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org).