Plant of the Month

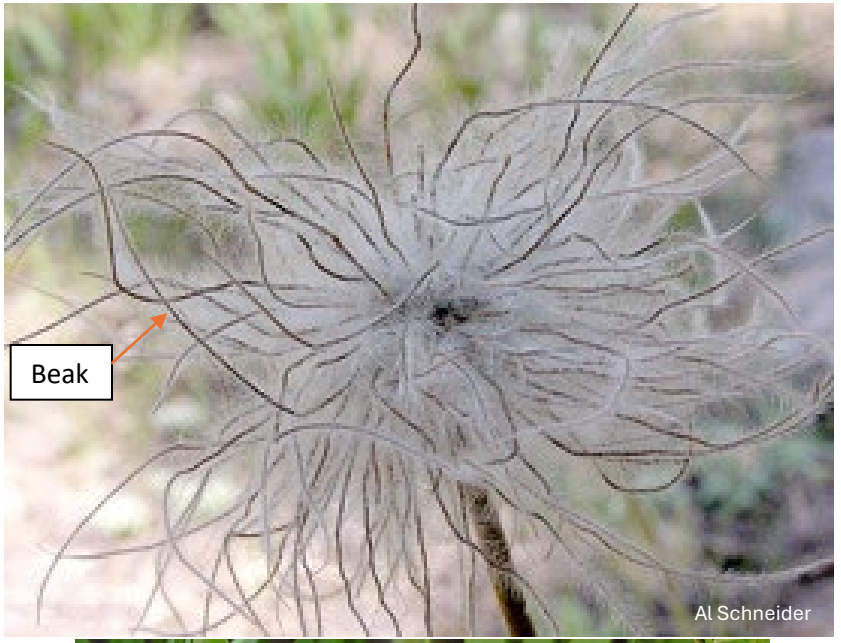
Pulsatilla nuttalliana – Nuttall's pasque flower
Family: Ranunculaceae, buttercup family
Habit: Plants are 5 to 50 cm tall; stems covered in dense, soft hairs; basal (at base) leaves composed of 3 dissected leaflets, these do not emerge until after the flower has bloomed; leaves just below the inflorescence clasp the stem and have deep, irregular lobes; the inflorescence is solitary with lavender to deep blue-purple sepals (not true petals); seeds have a long, fuzzy, thread-like structure called a beak, and are arranged in cluster that resembles a Dr. Seuss truffula tree; blooms April – July but reportedly can bloom again in October in warm years.
Habitat: Open hillsides, meadows, forests; 5,400- 13,000 feet.

The pasque flower is one of the earliest flowers to emerge in spring, often blooming with snow still on the ground. Its scientific name is highly contested and often referred to as *Pulsatilla patens* or *Anemone patens.* The pasque flower contains the toxin protoanemonin, which can cause digestive distress and skin irritation. Despite this toxic quality, some Indigenous people would use the dried leaves to relieve headaches and the root to revive the unconscious.

"Pulsatilla" comes from the Latin word for "pulsing" or "moving about." The addition of "illa" is diminutive, together meaning "a bit of quivering" referring to the plant's movement in the breeze. The species name refers to well respected 19th century botanist, Thomas Nuttall. Many plants are named after him including Nuttall's sunflower (*Helianthus nuttallii*), Nuttall's larkspur (*Delphinium nuttallianum*), and Nuttall's violet (*Viola nuttallii*), to name a few. Thomas Nuttall was an English naturalist who traveled across North America collecting and describing plants from 1808 to 1841. From the Atlantic to the Pacific, Nuttall described some 600 plant species. He also curated the Harvard Botanic Gardens and taught natural history from 1822 to 1833.

The pasque flower has long captivated its observers with its beauty and has become a symbol of renewal. It is the state flower of South Dakota and the provincial flower of Manitoba. There are several garden varieties on the market for early spring blooms, and you can even purchase *P. nuttalliana* from local nurseries that specialize in native species.

Al Schneider


Beak
Al Schneider

Basal leaf
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