In Nature's Garden:

Fringed Phacelia

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When my mother came to visit me from England, I took her down to the spring wildflower meetings in the Smoky Mountains. We have many good memories of that trip, but I think one of the best was the sight of a whole mountain hillside covered with fringed phacelia. This plant is spectacular when it grows as a big carpet over a wide area, and it is just as rewarding when you get up close and look at a single flower.

Fringed phacelia, *Phacelia fimbriata*, is a mountain flower belonging essentially to the southern Appalachians from Virginia to Alabama. It is not all that widespread but when it does occur, it often forms these striking masses of bloom covering as much as an acre. The plants are small, 6 to 20 inches high with slightly hairy, divided leaves. The flowers are arranged at the top of the stem in a loose coil supposed to resemble the tail of a scorpion, whence the common name of the genus, scorpion weed. The corolla is bell-shaped with five open lobes deeply notched into fringes. It is usually white but may sometimes be pale blue or lilac. There are five stamens and a two-cleft style, stamens and style projecting beyond the corolla. The plants are annuals, that is, they grow each year from the seed which matured and fell from the plants at the end of the preceding year.

Although I have never seen it suggested anywhere that Pacelia be eaten, true waterleaf, *Hydrophyllum*, has been used as a potherb. John Torrey, the famous nineteenth century botanist, records that the leaves were cooked as greens in New York state under the common name John’s cabbage. The Iroquois Indians also used the young leaves. In some early manuals dishes prepared from waterleaf are referred to as “Shawanese Salads” and the plants can apparently be served raw or cooked. One author cautions that leaves must be boiled twice and the first water discarded. This is common practice with a number of wild plants used as greens, and removes what might otherwise give the vegetables a slightly bitter taste. The aquatic genus *Hydrolea* is eaten in the East Indies but not in this country. The leaves are very bitter and are occasionally crushed to a pulp and used as a poultice.

Actually I do not have any desire to eat any member of this family, and especially not the delicate and attractive *Phacelia fimbriata*. It is not all that common in the state, but if you do find it, the chances are that you will find a great big mass of it, so do be sure and give it all the admiration it deserves.