

July 2011 Plant of the Month:

American Beech, *Fagus grandifolia*



July's signature holiday is July 4th the American birthday, Independence Day. To honor our American heritage, the Flora of New Jersey Project has selected an all-American species to represent the State's unique flora. The Plant of the Month for July is American Beech, *Fagus grandifolia*. This majestic tree is a cornerstone species found within upland forests throughout New Jersey, with the exception of the Pine Barrens.

American beech is a native canopy species found on rich soils from Sussex County to Cape May. It is common on the slopes of the Valley and Ridge, Highlands and Piedmont regions, with a distribution in Southern New Jersey tied to the Inner Coastal Plain fine textured soils as well as the Coastal edges where Cape May formation based soils have developed a richer growing medium than the near-sterile soils of the central Pine Barrens. Two varieties are recognized: var. *caroliniana* on the coastal plain and var. *grandifolia* on the richer slopes in northern parts of the State. Mary Hough (1983) described it from herbarium specimens within all Counties except Salem as well as being absent from the coastal strip. Person knowledge indicates this tree is common in Salem as well as the Delaware Bay shore region. It is also found on the coastal strip, but in much reduced numbers and dominance.

This species is one of New Jersey's most recognized trees. American beech can grow to more than 100 feet tall and is a canopy climax species where fire is infrequent. The distinct acuminate leaves with crenate edges are borne on smooth branches that emerge from the iconic light gray bark. Anyone familiar with American Beech knows the tree has been a favorite species for woodsmen and others to leave their mark carved in the tree's trunk. It is often an inside joke to botanists to say they didn't recognize the tree when it was without carved initials.

Be sure to say hello to this American icon of the forest on your next field adventure. You will be surprised to see how much American history is captured in words and carvings on this grand tree of the northeast.

