

2012 May Plant of the Month



Pagoda Dogwood

***Cornus alterniflora* L.**

As New Jersey slowly warms into the heat of the summer, our sub-canopy trees will come into bloom. One of the more striking woody plants in our deciduous forests will be Pagoda Dogwood. This arborescent species has a form similar to its more familiar cousin flowering dogwood. Unlike flowering dogwood, pagoda dogwood forms compact multiple white flowering umbels that open in May. The tree produces flowering umbels on the tips of each horizontal branch. This flowering scheme is similar to the shrub forms of dogwood such as red twig or silky. Unlike those similar shrubs, Pagoda dogwood's petals are creamy white that reflex sharply exposing the stamen and style. The flowers mature in late August and September into large oval blue drupes that present a tempting meal to fall migrating birds such as robins, thrushes and any other species large enough to swallow the pulpy drupe.

Pagoda dogwood is widespread yet infrequently encountered in New Jersey's forests. It is found throughout the three northern Physiographic Provinces (Valley and Ridge, Highlands, Piedmont) as well as on the richer soils found on the Inner Coastal Plain south into Salem County. Records exist for this tree from the Delaware Bay forests, the Coastal Strip and Cape May. The tree is not fire tolerant so it is absent from the fire sub-climax communities found throughout the Pine Barrens.