

## February 2015 Plant of the Month



*Epifagus virginiana* L., Beech Drops

The February *Plant of the Month* is beech drops. With most herbaceous plants dormant and no signs of spring, there are few species visible with the exception of our woody plants. One plant that exists in our woodlands is this diminutive and nearly invisible member of the Broomrape Family, the Orobanchaceae. *Epifagus virginiana* is an annual parasitic species that thrives specifically on American Beech, *Fagus grandiflora*. It lacks chlorophyll and as such blends into the mosaic of brown and tan tones commonly found on the leaf litter of the forest floor.

Beech drops annual appearance begins midsummer when seedlings emerge under stands of American Beech. Seedlings roots attach with haustoria to shallow beech roots and obtain sugar and micronutrients from its host. Flowers appear by late August and according to the literature, the plant produces open and closed flowers, with the closed or cleistogamous type providing a higher percent of viable seeds. Seeds disperse as the capsule matures in autumn. The skeletons of the flowering stalks are visible throughout the winter, until seedlings appear the following season.

The species is quite widespread within New Jersey and grows in every upland hardwood forest wherever American Beech is a canopy component. Mary Hough (1983) indicates specimens have been collected in all Piedmont, Highland and Valley and Ridge counties, and includes Ocean, Burlington, Camden and Gloucester Coastal Plain counties. My personal wanderings in southern New Jersey have observed this plant in Salem, Cumberland and Cape May counties as well.