

## March 2015 Plant of the Month



*Melampyrum lineare* L., Cow wheat

The March *Plant of the Month* is cow wheat. March is supposed to come in like a lion, but this year it is in with a cow. *Melampyrum* is a figwort, and was once a member of the Scrophulariaceae. Today's taxonomy separates this former widely used family into six (6) related families, one of which is the Orobanchaceae. This is the same family our February Plant of the Month, beech drops, belonged.

Like beech drops, cow wheat is parasitic. It is parasitic on heath shrubs such as low bush blueberry and the huckleberries. Unlike beech drops, it retains chlorophyll, continuing to photosynthesize a portion of its energy needs. Cow wheat has a distinct opposite leaf and stem arrangement. Its diminutive size restricts its distribution to small gaps and openings under dense shrub cover. The plant prefers acidic xeric to mesic soils. It is never in wetlands, and is a good upland indicator. The species is common on the Coastal Plain. Oak and pine forests are its typical southern habitat yet it is frequent under beech and red oak forests in the northern half of the state.

Cow wheat has a similar distribution to its cousin beech drops. It is widespread within New Jersey and grows in every upland hardwood forest. Mary Hough (1983) indicates specimens exist in the Chrysler Herbarium for every New Jersey County with the exception of Morris.

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