

March 2017 Plant of the Month



Corema conradii Torr., Broom Crowberry

The March *Plant of the Month* is one of NJ's most curious shrubs, *Corema conradii*, the Broom Crowberry. The species is restricted to the Pine Plains and the immediately surrounding landscapes. Crowberry is a northern species disjunct from its nearest other population. The plant is found on Newfoundland, on my ancestral home, Prince Edward's Island, in Nova Scotia and south along the coast to Cape Cod and west into the mountains of New York. The southern most population is in the Pine Barrens, restricted to the Pine Plains in Ocean and Burlington Counties. The plant is protected and listed as a S2 by the State and LP by the Pinelands Commission.

The species is a member of the Empetraceae, the Crowberry Family. No other member of the family grows in New Jersey. Its presence in our State may reflect a southern migration during the Late Glacial Maximum, some 25 thousand years ago. The subsequent retreating glacier left this plant on an elevated gravel landscape that appears to benefit the species. The shrub is an evergreen with tiny, linear leaves. The plant can reach nearly a meter (0.6 m, Fernald, 1950). In New Jersey's Pine Plains, however, most plants are low cushions created by occasional disturbance such as fire. The plant is very fragile, and does not persist after repeated trampling or impacts caused by vehicles. It is a true upland species, and does not tolerate extended periods of soil saturation. For this reason, we often see the plant on some of the driest hillside and sandy exposures in the Pine Plains.

The shrub is one of our earliest flowering plants. It will be in full flower in a few days, if it has not already occurred with the mild late winter temperatures. The flowers are of two types: male and female, purple and requires a close observation. When mature, the flowers produces a tiny drupe.

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