

2012
January Plant of the Month



Southern Slender Ladies-tresses
***Spiranthes lacera* (Raf.) Raf. Var. *gracilis* (Bigelow) Luer**

New Jersey is in the heart of winter 2011-2012, and the Flora of New Jersey selected a species from the heart of the summer to warm up the idle days of January. The Plant of the Month for the start calendar year 2012 is one of our native old field orchids: ladies tresses. This old field wildflower is visible late July and August through September when temperatures are nearly 4 times higher than today's mid 20°F.

Spiranthes lacera var. *gracilis* is a modern synonym for *Spiranthes gracilis* (Bigel.) Beck. This native orchid inhabits roadsides and old fields throughout the state. New Jersey records exist for every county except Atlantic and Warren. The absence in these counties is attributed to a lack of herbarium records not a lack of suitable habitat. Southern slender ladies tresses are native from Florida to Maine west to Nebraska where it occupies discrete local dry open old fields, edges and gaps. I am familiar with this plants south of the Raritan River where it is found with grasses and other old field plants. Winter mowing and weak ground fires have positive effects on its habitat. Common associate species includes purple-top grass (*Tridens flavus*), meadow fescues (*Festuca* spp.), orchard grass (*Dactylis glomerata*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), hawkweeds (*Hieracium* spp.), goldenrods (*Solidago* spp.) and nearly any dry old field plant species. Be aware, it occupies similar habitat as *Spiranthes tuberosa* (S3) and *Spiranthes vernalis*. Each can be at flower at the same time between late July and September so other characters are used to differentiate the species. *S. tuberosa* has a "clear" lower lip that glistens whereas the others have a green or colored lower lip. *S. lacera* v. *gracilis* and *S. vernalis* can be determined in part by the presence of stem (cauline) leaves for spring ladies-tresses that are missing on southern ladies tresses.

It's not possible to see the ladies tresses today. You'll have to wait 7 or 8 months. The time can be spent searching for suitable habitat so that when the temperatures rise to nearly 100°F you can drag yourself into the full sun where this plant will be waiting. JRA, 1/12