



Grasses Visible in winter: *Dichanthelium*

The severe weather is upon us and down here in Southern New Jersey we are under a blanket of snow. So botany has to be an arm chair event or if you venture out be focused on woody plant bark, twig or buds. When the snow eventually melts, there will many herbaceous plants that are visible during the coldest parts of the winter. One such group is the rosette panic grasses, the genus *Dichanthelium*. This wide spread group of grasses occupy nearly every habitat in New Jersey so there is nowhere to hide from these tiny yet identifiable diminutive plants.

The rosette panic grasses each have particular basal leaf shape, size and characteristics. Each can be used to narrow the possible species and when obvious characters are present, easily lead you to a winter identification of a plant that normally needs 10 separate measurements!

The photos provided for this month's post show four such *Dichantheliums* found walking in a Southern Outer Coastal Plain oak dominated forest. The widespread *Dichanthelium clandestinum* (top photo) has large, light green, leathery basal leaves that has few similar species within our region: *D. polyanthes*-shorter and darker green, *D. latifolium*-no elevated strigous hairs. The smallest is *D. dichotomum* (second from top). It is nearly hairless with the exception of a few stray cilia. Larger and more oval (and usually purple) is *D. commutatum* (third photo). *Dichanthelium sabulorum v. patulum* (bottom photo) is similar to *Dichanthelium dichotomum* in size but differs with the presence of distinct villous cilia and lighter color.

When walking through the snow be aware that under your feet are tiny plants that, with just a little digging, could be a grass just waiting to be identified! Let's hope the deep freeze is brief so everyone can get back into searching for our native flora that includes the wide spread group of grasses: the *Dichantheliums*.