

March 2014 Plant of the Month



Ornithogalum umbellatum L., Star of Bethlehem

The March *Plant of the Month* is the common star of Bethlehem. This is an introduced perennial that grows from a persistent bulb and is spread by seed wherever it becomes established. It is common throughout the state but is less so along the coastal edge east of Route 9 and in the center of the Pine Barrens. The plant has been part of New Jersey's introduced flora for a long time and is well established in the suburban lawns, pastures and roadside so typical of New Jersey's agricultural and suburban landscapes. Mary Hough (1983) describes specimens collected from all Piedmont and Coastal Plain counties sans Atlantic. I have personally observed star of Bethlehem near Buena Vista Borough and in western edge of the county so Atlantic is now included within its range. The USDA Plants Database uses a map similar to Hough's work and probably reflects the same data. I bet with a little effort, specimens could be obtained from all New Jersey counties including Sussex, Warren, Passaic and Morris counties. The plant is widespread in the Northeast United States and is considered an established introduced species. The introduction was probably from Europe during the earliest days of colonization. Today, It can be found in North America from the Canadian Maritimes south to Mississippi and as far west as Kansas.

The star of Bethlehem is a member of the Lily family. Like many lilies, it is a weak stemmed perennial with a growth strategy focused on early spring flowering. Flowers are borne from mid spring to early summer on erect umbels, 5-6 per stem. Its six parted flowers composed of undifferentiated flowers composed of 3 sepals and 3 petals. This 3 parted arrangement is typical of the family and the petals and sepals are sometimes collectively called tepals. The tepal color is usually bright white, yet variations are known. The leaves are long, linear grass-like blades. The thick blade, smooth texture, "u" shaped cross section and white striping are clues to this plant even during the non-flowering seasons. The plant is early to fade from the scene, withering to yellow leaves by mid-summer.

Fernald (1950) identifies the whimsical genus name is derived from the Greek *ornis* for bird and *gala* for milk. Both are probably references to the bright white flowers. Fernald also provides a quirky common name for our species, "*nap at noon*". This is probably a reference to the flower's nature to close at noon.

If our spring ever arrives and if the winter season-long snow cover melts the plant will be one of the harbingers of spring. Watch the rich roadsides and meadows for this common spring introduction to New Jersey's flora.