

## June 2014 Plant of the Month



*Aralia nudicaulis* L., Wild Sarsaparilla

The June *Plant of the Month* is wild sarsaparilla, *Aralia nudicaulis*. Wild sarsaparilla is a common woodland herb that is found throughout New Jersey. It has been described for all 21 counties. This plant is easily seen in mature woodlands with a mesic landscape positions. It is often found in mixed hardwood forest from Newfoundland south to Georgia and west to edge of the eastern deciduous forest. New Jersey's populations are often associated in undisturbed woods, according to Mary Hough (1983), yet many occupy open road shoulders outside the direct influence of the nearby forest.

*Aralia nudicaulis* is identified by compound leaves arranged in a whirl formed at the tip of rather stiff erect stems. Stems can grow up to 40 cm tall, but most are normally shorter. The flowers are white, with 5 petals and 2 styles. The flowers are in umbels formed from the whirled leaf axils. The fruits are black and 5 seeded. Additionally, it is a close relative to the famed ginseng, *Panax quinquefolium*.

Wild sarsaparilla has many uses. It was used by Native Americans for a wide array of medicinal concoctions to treat stomach and intestinal ailments. Most herbal references describe drinks or tinctures made from either the roots or berries. It was once used as a substitution for a soft drink similar to root beer, sarsaparilla. The berries can also make a wine or a dark colored soft drink. Native Americans along the Southern Gulf Coast roasted the roots and mixed the dried plant parts with dried fish to form a type of pemmican.

Wild sarsaparilla is visible now and can be found anywhere rich woodlands exist. It is less common in the Pine Barrens yet is present on the edges of cedar swamps, such as Shinn's Branch, Lebanon (Brendan Byrn) State Forest. If native remedies are on your list of must see plants then now is the time to see this many talented wild medicinal herb.

JRA 6.2014