

## August 2014 Plant of the Month



*Goodyera pubescens* (Willd.) R. Br., Downy Rattlesnake Plantain

The August plant of the month is the one New Jersey's 30+ species of native orchids. Downy rattlesnake plantain is one of our more common species, readily seen in mature or maturing hardwood forests. It is an upland plant excluded from swamps and moist ravines so often associated with New Jersey's native orchids. This plant is visible year round, identified by its checkered leaves with distinct white mid vein. The downy or pubescence that covers the plant's flowers and flowering stem give it the "Downy" name. The rattlesnake epithet is from the resemblance of the leaf pattern to the reticulated pattern seen on our rattlesnakes.

*Goodyera pubescens* is one of three species of rattlesnake plantain found in New Jersey. The downy species is the most widespread. Mary Hough (1983) cites records for nearly every county. It exists in Mercer, Ocean, Salem and Cumberland, leaving only the urban northern trio of Hudson Union and Essex counties without herbarium records or recent identification. The plant prefers mesic soils with a loamy texture. It also prefers mature or maturing hardwood canopies. I have personally seen it growing with Virginia pines, just as happy so the canopy preference seems to be an artifact of our disturbance patterns. It obviously needs some time to colonize a forest and the mature or stable upland conditions seem to fit this long-term disturbance pattern.

Early Americans used this plant for a variety of medicines such as a poultice of crushed leaves to treat sore mouths of children, and similar tinctures for kidney and other dietary ailments. Downy rattlesnake plantain will be in flower during the first half of this month. It produces a raceme of clear white flowers clustered at the tip of long flowering stalks. The characteristic checkered patterned leaves are always present providing a delicate accent to a beautiful flower cluster.

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