

January 2017 Plant of the Month



Celastrus scandens L., Climbing Bittersweet

Plant of the Month for January is native vine that was once a common sight throughout the State outside of the heart of the Pine Barrens. Climbing bittersweet was a common roadside vine and its red berried fruits a reliable signal to the pending change in seasons. It was a common plant used in Christmas decorations and wreaths. Its presence in New Jersey, specifically the southern part of its range, decreased rapidly. I recall see drifts of this plant in Camden and Gloucester Counties, along railroad s and country road edges. My last sighting was in the late 1970s, thereafter to be replaced with the invasive *Celastrus orbiculatus*, Oriental bittersweet. I have been on the lookout ever since. Then, in late December 2016, I was inspecting an old farm site in Ewing Township, Mercer County when I spied a bittersweet with terminal fruits! I could hardly believe my eyes. A plants once so common, that had slowly dwindled to obscurity because of a Asiatic invader, was still growing around old specimen trees planted for the farmyard. The photo above is a twig I cut from that plant to assure myself it was our long lost native. Stone (1910) found the plant frequently in thickets in the northern counties, on the coastal islands as well as in Cape May. Mary Hough (1983) shows voucher specimens from most of New Jersey's counties outside the Pine Barrens. She noted the plant early demise, indicating it was rapidly decreasing. The plant is distinguished from its Asiatic cousin by the terminal racemes as opposed to axillary cymes present on the non-native. The leaves are also distinct, oval - oblong with finely pointed serrate teeth. The non-native leaves are orbicular with crenate teeth.

Common uses include dried berries for ornaments, dye and when cooked (poisonous raw), food in an emergency. Native Eastern North American tribes used the plant for a variety of ailments and the bark of the vines as a food source when times were hard.