

July 2017 Plant of the Month



Polygala polygama Walt., Racemed Milkwort

The July *Plant of the Month* is an interesting member of New Jersey's flora. Racemed milkwort is a biennial or weak perennial herb. It is a member of the milkwort family, the Polygalaceae. The manual descriptions and early collections, such as those made by Bayard Long, indicate the plant can reach a height of nearly 50 cm, yet all the plants I have ever seen never exceed 20 cm. Fernald (1950) identified two varieties. Our plant is the typical variety, with a distribution into New Jersey, west to Kentucky and south to Florida. The second variety *obtusata* Chodat is a smaller plant with closer spaced flowers. That plant extends beyond New Jersey into the Nova Scotia.

Our plants are hairless with ovate leaves. The plant is often purple tinged, especially as the season progresses. The widely spaced flowers and rose purple flowers make this plant readily distinguished from other local member of the genus. It has been recorded for all of the Coastal Plain Counties with scattered occurrences in the northern Counties (Hough, 1983). Stone (1910) found the plant on dry sandy ground. He described it as rare in the Pine Barrens, and locally common in the middle district. Currently, strong populations exist in Gloucester, Salem and Cumberland Counties. The plant occupies open, sand and gravel habitats, and in southern Counties is found on Aura and Sassafras sandy loam soils. The New Jersey Heritage Program ranks the plant as a S2 species. Native Americans used racemed milkwort as a decoction of the plant for a cough medicine (the Montagnais; Moerman, 1998).

The species flowers between May and July, and may be seen on the edge of disturbed sites and old fields dominated by our native warm season grasses. Be sure to keep a sharp eye out for this beautiful little milkwort as you walk the uplands of New Jersey.

JRA, 7/2017