

February 2018 Plant of the Month



Gaultheria procumbens L., Wintergreen, Teaberry, Checkerberry, Mountain Tea, Ivory-Leaves, Pettit the Des Bois (Fernald, 1950; p 1126); seeds from an archaeological site

Wintergreen and Teaberry are two local common names applied to February's Plant of the Month, *Gaultheria procumbens*. This small shrub is widely distributed in the eastern United States and Canada, with a range extending from Newfoundland to Georgia. New Jersey's population is widespread. It is found State-wide but is most abundant in the Outer Coastal Plain and in the northern mountains. Mary Hough (1983) maps indicate counties with a voucher specimen in Chrysler herbarium. Her mapping indicates there are quite a few counties where we know the plant exists yet no specimen is in the herbarium. Atlantic, Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Mercer, Passaic, Salem, Somerset, and Warren Counties are not mapped. I know by my personal field experience that tea-berry is found in these counties, with the exception of Hudson. This is a case of the under collection of an otherwise common species.

Gaultheria procumbens is an interesting species. It is a woody shrub of diminutive size. It is a member of the blueberry family, Ericaceae. Dr. Walt Bien's nomenclature treatment identifies two species in New Jersey: Teaberry, and *Gaultheria hispidula*, the Creeping Snowberry (<http://www.njflora.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Ericaceae-for-web.pdf>). The latter is a northern plant with representation in the northern tier counties of Sussex, Passaic and Bergen.

Our Plant of the Month is an aromatic shrub that grows to about 15 cm. It is evergreen, and flowers in late summer. The fruit is a red berry that ripens in the fall. The leaves, fruit and stem yield Oil of Wintergreen. This product natural product and its artificial substitutes flavor many common foods. Teaberry was well known to Native Americans of the eastern forests. It was used wherever it grew. The uses varied, but included medicinal, food, and other uses.

Gaultheria procumbens is visible year round. Anyone hiking or exploring the Pine Barrens or the mountains should be able to see this plant at this time of the year. It will be one of the very few evergreen groundcovers in undisturbed acidic habitats.

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