

March 2018 Plant of the Month



Chamaedaphne calyculata (L.) Moench, Leather-Leaf

March's *Plant of the Month* is leather leaf, an abundant shrub of acidic bogs and fens. *Chamaedaphne* is a member of the blueberry family, Ericaceae. It is frequent throughout the State, yet specimens do not exist for Mercer, Morris, Somerset, Warren, or Sussex Counties (Mary Hough, 1983). Leather leaf is common in saturated organic soils, and is considered an obligate wetland shrub. It is frequently observed in Pine Barrens wetlands, especially in depressions and Atlantic white cedar swamps.

Chamaedaphne is a mono-specific genus. Fernald (1950) identifies two varieties: *angustifolia* and *latifolia*. Dr. Walt Bien's nomenclature treatment recognizes one variety in New Jersey: *Chamaedaphne calyculata* var. *angustifolia* (<http://www.njflora.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Ericaceae-for-web.pdf>). The variety *latifolia* is a northern plant with found in New England and the Canadian Maritimes. Our Plant of the Month is evergreen, and flowers in early spring. The fruit is a dry, five parted depressed capsule that ripens in the fall. The leaves are easily distinguished from other native evergreen shrubs in acid bogs. The leaves are 2-5 cm. long, have somewhat involuted edges and are covered with silvery, punctate glands. The flowers appear early April on terminal, one sided racemes. Corollas are bright white.

Native Americans used leather leaf leaves in a brewed tea. Some tribes used a poultice as a dermatological aid for inflammations. Leather leaf is visible year round. Anyone hiking or exploring the Pine Barrens or the mountains with a sandstone or granitic base geology should be able to see this plant at this time of the year. It will be one of the very few evergreen shrubs in normally highly acidic, perennial wetland habitats.

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