

## October 2019 Plant of the Month



*Liatris pilosa* (Ainton) Willd., Grass-leaved or Shaggy Blazing Star

October 2019's **Plant of the Month** is one of New Jersey's Coastal Plain fall showy composites: *Liatris pilosa*, the blazing star. This plant is one of New Jersey's most distinctive fall flowering species, with its bright purple raceme. The plant is a member of the Asteraceae, the Daisy family (formerly the Compositae). The plant is also known to some of our New Jersey plant enthusiasts by its former name, *Liatris graminifolia*. Grass-leaved blazing star, when in flower, is a familiar sight along our Outer Coastal Plain roadsides and old fields. The purple spikes are visible mixed with goldenrods and thoroughworts. Mary Hough (1983) documented voucher specimens have been collected from all of the Coastal Plain counties except Monmouth. The USDA Plants Database maps the species throughout the eastern States from New Jersey south to Florida, and west to isolated stations in Alabama and West Virginia.

New Jersey supports a few other members of the genus *Liatris*. The New Jersey other *Liatris* species have floral, leaf, and root differences from the Plant of the Month. *Liatris spicata*, *L. pycnostachya*, and *L. scariosa* (3 varieties) are three other members of the genus growing naturally in New Jersey. *Liatris spicata* is our most common plant outside the Pine Barrens. It is also the species we see offered for the perennial gardens by regional nurseries. *Liatris scariosa* and its three varieties are recorded for the northeastern corner of the State. *Liatris pycnostachya* is a tall western species that has escaped cultivation and is persistent in Egg Harbor City between Rout 50 and Cologne Road. All three have flowering racemes that are more robust, and have lighter pink flowers than our Plant of the Month. *Liatris pilosa*'s flowers are presented on a narrow raceme. The flower colors are darker, and have a visible purple hue. This color variation is subtle, but the narrow width of the flowering stalk is distinct.

Native Americans used the genus throughout the continent (Moerman, 1998). There is no record of *Liatris graminifolia*'s use, but other New Jersey species were used for medicine and food. The roots were once used as an analgesic, as a heart medicine, and a kidney aid. The roots were collected and used as a food source, probably like any other tuber. This species is in flower now, and will continue to be visible until the first frost. Anyone wishing to see this species can do so now by driving the back roads in the Pine Barrens anywhere in the vicinity of the villages of Chatsworth and Warren Grove.