

2019 December *Guess that Plant*



Vaccinium corymbosum L., High-bush Blueberry

The December 2019 *Guess that Plant* was a one of a New Jersey most widespread and well known shrubs, the high-bush blueberry, *Vaccinium corymbosum*. High-bush blueberry is one of a number of *Vaccinium* species native to the State, and is the progenitor of the modern cultivated varieties. The species is found in every New Jersey county, although Mary Hough (1983) and the USDA Plants Database show no documentation for the species in Gloucester County. As I write this species description, I can attest to its presence in the county as I look out my Franklin Township, Gloucester County office window. Here, I observe the native shrub intermixed with a black huckleberry, dangleberry, and early low bush blueberry shrub layer under a white, scarlet, southern red and black oak forest canopy. The plant has a FACW wetland designation, yet it is often found across the hydrological gradient from the hill tops to swamp lowlands.

Vaccinium corymbosum flowers early in spring, often in late April or early May, producing mature fruits in late June and July. The flowers are a distinct waxy, narrow bell shaped corolla. The photo used for this month's guess is an extreme example of the variability within the species. The recent research into the genus discovered a diverse species genome, creating the concept the species is the result of species and variety intermixing. It is known to exhibit 2x, 4x, and 6x polyploidy (Boches, Bassil, and Rowland, J. Am. Hor. Society, 2006) creating the wide phenotypic expression seen throughout the State.

The cultivated blueberry became the crop we enjoy today because of the work of Whitesbog's Elizabeth White and Dr. Frederick Coville, from the USDA. Their cooperative work during the early part of the 20th century resulted in the start of the commercial berry industry. The Elizabeth variety is one of the first named and finest selections. It is named after Elizabeth White, and the berry is still grown today at the Whitesbog Village, Pemberton, New Jersey.