

August 2020 Plant of the Month



Plantathera peramoena (A. Gray) A. Gray; Purple Fringeless Orchid

August's *Plant of the Month* is another botanical gem discovered by Brian Johnson, the naturalist and field manager for the non-profit land preservation organization, the Natural Lands Trust. Brian identified this colony last year, and its continued presence with flowering is an indication the plants are thriving in a usual coastal habitat. The plant is found in a marsh/forest fringe habitat close to the rising freshwater tidal waters of the Maurice River. This find re-establishes the endangered orchid in the Delaware Bay region. The colony is composed of only a few plants, and they are found in two discrete locations. There is evidence of deer browse, necessitating the placement of a protective wire cage visible in the species' photo. The fence deters the deer, allowing the plants to produce the beautiful display for this month's description.

Purple fringeless orchid is a member of the Orchidaceae, the orchid family. This is one of fourteen *Plantathera* species found in New Jersey. It is one of two species with bright purple colored petals. The other species is the purple fringed orchid, *Plantathera psycodes*. This plant is found in the northern counties above the fall line. The USDA Plants Database and Mary Hough (1983) both map purple fringeless orchid in Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Camden and Cape May counties. The Natural Lands Trust population expands this known distribution into Cumberland County. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program lists our Plant of the Month as S-1, an endangered species designation.

The genus *Plantathera* is widespread in eastern North America. A few species were used by Native Americans for a suspected medicinal value. *Plantathera peramoena* is not described in the ethno-botanical literature, but it was probably used in a similar manner. It is doubtful this species was ever abundant, so its use would have been focused specifically on this plant, or used when serendipity allowed its discovery.

The purple fringeless orchid is past flowering. The plants were at their peak flowering this season on July 22nd. Anyone wishing to see this plant has to be lucky and persistent. We are lucky we have had the good fortune of Brian Johnson's keen eyes, and without him this plant would be a species still awaiting rediscovery.

JRA, 8/2020