

September 2021 Plant of the Month



Persicaria hydropiperoides (Michx.) Small
False water-pepper smartweed or mild water-pepper

The September *Plant of the Month* is a native, perennial aptly named water pepper smartweed. This plant is a member of the Smartweed family, the Polygonaceae. New Jersey is home to many smartweed species, both native and introduced. Our Plant of the Month is found throughout North America. The genus was formerly named *Polygonum*, a synonym today for *Persicaria*. The genus *Polygonum* is now used for a small subset of the earlier taxonomic grouping. *Persicaria hydropiperoides* is widespread in New Jersey. Mary Hough's New Jersey Wild Plants (1983) identifies this species as one of our most abundant. Only the urban Hudson River counties do not have voucher records.

False water pepper is an obligate wetland species (OBL), and is always found around lakes, ponds, bogs and other bodies of water. The name, *P. hydropiperoides* is an acknowledgement of a similarity to the annual, introduced *Persicaria hydropiper*. The false water pepper is a perennial with extensive creeping narrow rootstocks (Fernald, 1950), whereas *P. hydropiper* is an annual without the branching rootstock. The monthly photo shows September's plant on a flooded cranberry bog where it forms part of the surrounding open water's edge flora. It differs from its closest similar species, *Persicaria setaceum*, by the length of the ocreae bristles.

The plants once in the old genus *Polygonum* were often used by Native American for a variety of uses. Most often smartweeds were used for a drug, including analgesic and gastrointestinal aids (Moerman, 1998). Moerman's records curiously do not include the native *P. hydropiperoides*, but lists *P. hydropiper* with historic uses. This is suspect and may reflect the lack of correct specific identifications. The *Plant of the Month* can be seen on acidic ponds and lake edges from now until first frost.