

December 2021 Plant of the Month



Apios americana Medikus; Ground-nut

The December *Plant of the Month* is a native perennial vine known as ground-nut. This plant is classified in the family Fabaceae, the pea or legume family and is one of the many species New Jersey supports in this family. Ground-nut is an obligate wetland plant that prefers alluvial soils on floodplains and stream side thickets. It is found in every county, and is one of our widespread native legumes (Stone, 1910; Mary Hough, 1983).

Ground-nut is New Jersey's only *Apios* species. Fernald (1950) identified a second species (*Apios priceana*) in the Kentucky and Tennessee. The genus is also found in east Asia, with trailing species with similar form and habitat preferences. Our species is identified by its compound leaf, its dark maroon to purple flowers, and its perennial tuber.

Moerman (1998) recognized the use of this plant as a staple food by many native North American tribes. All early cultures utilized this species as a seasonal food that was collected from the forest. Our local Lenni-Lenape made cakes and bread from dried ground nut powder. They also boiled the root similar to a potato for its starch. This was a species that no doubt augmented the cultivated "three sisters" crops of corn, squash and beans.

It is way too late to see our monthly plant. It flowers in July and August. Its leaves are identifiable by June, and its tubers is harvestable year round. We'll have to wait until next summer to enjoy this widespread native vine.

JRA, 12/2021