

February 2022 Plant of the Month



Spiranthes lacera v. *gracilis* (Bigelow) Luer, Southern Slender Ladies-tresses

February's *Plant of the Month* is a plant that is found throughout the State yet is often overlooked. Southern Ladies-tresses, *Spiranthes lacera* v. *gracilis*. This species synonym is *S. gracilis* and was combined with the northern variety by the orchid expert Luer. Southern slender ladies-tresses is a diminutive member of the orchid family Orchidaceae. Fernald (1950) describes the habitat as dry to moist sterile open soil, thickets or open woods. My experience with this species has been restricted to the southern Coastal Plain counties where it occupies open, old field and roadside habitats. Mary Hough (1983) cites voucher specimens from all counties with the exception of Atlantic, Mercer, and the Hudson Riverside counties of Union and Hudson. I personally have observed the species in Ewing Township, confirming the statewide designation.

The southern slender ladies-tresses is one of New Jersey's six *Spiranthes* species, the species names and number dependent on taxonomic and nomenclatural revisions. The plant's closest relative is *Spiranthes tuberosa*, the slender ladies-tresses. That species occupies similar dry and open habitat and is found within a similar range as our monthly plant. It is distinguished from our Plant of the Month by the lack of a green color within the throat of the tubular flower

Moerman (1998) cites an Ojibwa hunting medicine and charm use for the species. Generally, the genus has medicinal uses for blood treatments and using the roots of some species as food. Our monthly species flowers in July and August. Its leaves will not be identifiable until mid summer, and as with any species in the winter dormant stage, we'll have to wait until next summer to enjoy this beautiful native perennial herb.