

September 2023 Plant of the Month



Lyonia mariana (L.) D. Don, Staggerbush

The September *Plant of the Month* is a native shrub common on the Outer Coastal plain, and primarily the heart of the Pine Barrens. Staggerbush is a member of the heath family, the Ericaceae. Hough (1983) found specimens for all of the Southern counties and scattered occurrences on the uplands in the Piedmont. Stone (1910) pointed out the species did not grow south of Dennisville on the Cape May peninsula. This plant will occupy the edges of seasonally saturated wetlands as well as drought prone sands of the central Pine Barrens.

Staggerbush, like all blueberries and huckleberries, produces an urn shaped corolla. Staggerbush, however, produces the largest of the group. This large, waxy corolla is accompanied by clusters that create a spectacular bouquet. This often occurs after a forest fire. The plant grows up to 1 meter, but most specimens are knee high. The name staggerbush is either for the staggered orientation of the stem buds, or the effect it had on grazing animals such as sheep and goats. Staggerbush has one close relative in New Jersey, male berry, *Lyonia ligustrina*. Unlike staggerbush, male berry is an obligate wetland species and is always found in our coastal swamps.

Lyonia mariana has only one documented use, as a dermatological aid for toe itch, called "ground itch" by Cherokee (Moerman, 1998). Staggerbush flowers in mid-summer, so it is no longer visible as it shows a cluster of white flowers. What is visible are the large hard capsules that form after the flowers were pollinated. The capsules re-orient to protrude upward, nearly 180-degrees from the orientation of the flowers. Seeing both the flowers nodding and the capsules up lifted is a sight to see.