Mountain bugbane
Actaea podocarpa

Description

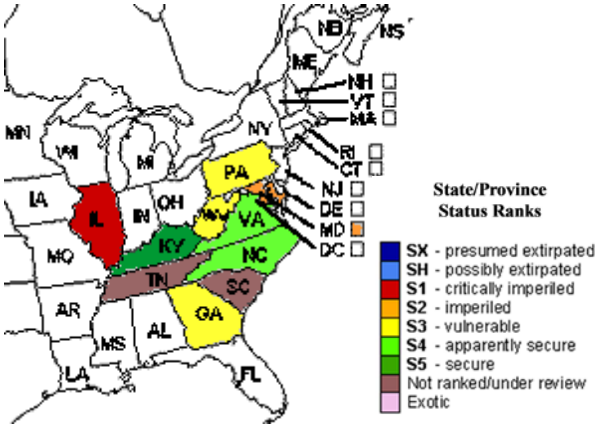
Mountain bugbane (*Actaea podocarpa*) is a perennial herb that grows up to one and a half meters tall. The leaves are compound, toothed, and deeply cleft with a large terminal leaflet. The leaflets are oval to wedge-shaped with sharply defined teeth. All leaflets are less than 10 centimeters long. The flowers are presented in August on a slender raceme up to 30 centimeters tall that opens from the bottom up; the flowers are tiny and white, they lack petals, and have short-lived sepals. The most conspicuous feature of the raceme is the spray of many white stamens and the strong foul odor produced to attract flies for pollination. Mountain bugbane can be distinguished from the very similar black cohosh (*Actaea racemosa*), because it has three or more carpels instead of the one black cohosh has, and because its seed pods are stalked while those of black cohosh are sessile.

Photo: Rita Hawrot (PNHP)

Mountain bugbane (*Actaea podocarpa*)

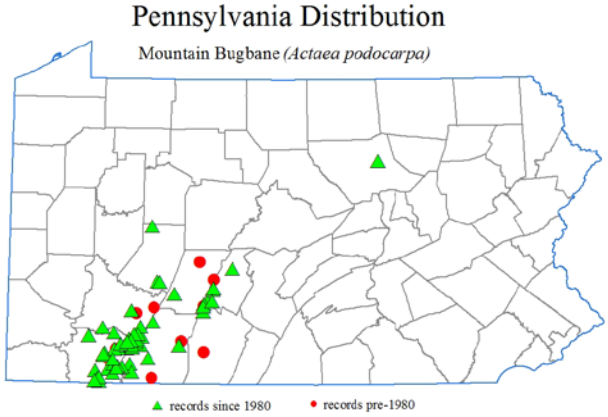
North American State/Province Conservation Status

Map by NatureServe 2014



Distribution & Habitat

Mountain bugbane grows in rich hardwood forests, often in the same habitat as hemlock, on north-facing mountainsides, or the wooded corridors that follow mountain streams. It is restricted to the central Appalachians, from Pennsylvania south to Georgia and as far west as Illinois.



Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program Data 3-2014

Current State Status

Mountain bugbane is primarily endangered by development of its habitat, but populations have also suffered from harvesting pressure. Although mountain bugbane is not particularly valuable in itself, its similar-looking relative black cohosh is a highly sought-after medicinal herb (though clinical studies have failed to verify the claims of supplement-producing companies). Between 300,000 and 500,000 pounds of black cohoch were collected from the wild for sale in 1999, and some of this was almost certainly mountain bugbane.

Conservation Considerations

Much is still unknown about where mountain bugbane grows and how secure its existing populations are. Information about how often it is collected with black bugbane would greatly aid conservation efforts. Given present information, habitat conservation is what this species needs most.

NatureServe conservation status ranks

G4 – Apparently secure globally; **S3** – Vulnerable in Pennsylvania

References

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Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program