

Downy Lettuce

Lactuca hirsuta

Description

The downy lettuce is an annual or biennial herb with milky sap. The slightly to densely hairy stem can reach 8 feet (2.5 m) in height. The leaves are arranged alternately on the stem and variable in shape and length, but tend to have toothed, pinnate lobes. The flowers are individually tiny and are grouped in yellow flower heads that are 5/8 to 7/8 inch (15 to 22 mm) long at maturity. The individual fruits have a slender “beak” at the top, somewhat similar to dandelions. The flower heads and fruits of downy lettuce are slightly larger than a very similar and much more common species of wild lettuce, *Lactuca canadensis*.

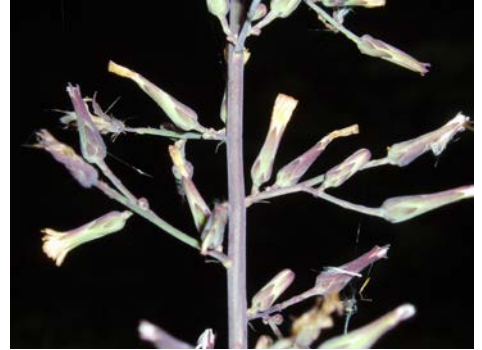


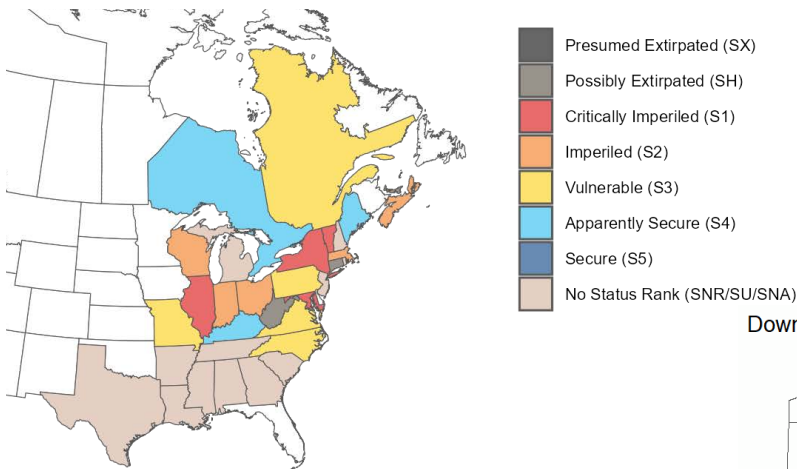
Photo source: John Kunsman (PNHP)

Distribution & Habitat

The downy lettuce has a distribution from Canada south and west into Georgia and Texas. In Pennsylvania, it has been found scattered throughout the state. The species grows in open woods, clearings, thickets, powerline and pipeline rights-of-way, and ridgetops.

North American State/Province Conservation Status

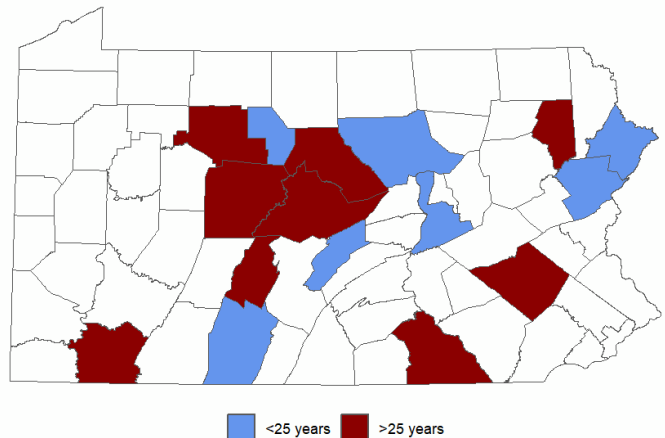
Map by NatureServe 2025



Current State Status

The PA Biological Survey (PABS) considers downy lettuce to be a species of special concern, based on the relatively few occurrences that have been recently confirmed. It does not have a PA legal rarity status, but has been assigned a suggested rarity status of Undetermined by PABS, meaning that more information is needed before a more definitive rarity status can be designated.

Downy Lettuce (*Lactuca hirsuta*)



Conservation Considerations

More field surveys are needed to determine the range, abundance, and ecological requirements of downy lettuce before a more definitive conservation status, if any, can be assigned. Based on current data, it appears to be a short-lived, early successional species that may have a very limited viability at a given occurrence, even under optimal conditions.

NatureServe conservation status ranks

G5? – Globally secure; S3 – Vulnerable in Pennsylvania

References

- NatureServe. 2025. NatureServe Explorer [web application] NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available at <https://explorer.natureserve.org> (Accessed: May 8, 2025)
- Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program. 2025.
- Rhoads, A.F. and W.M. Klein, Jr. 1993. The Vascular Flora of Pennsylvania: Annotated Checklist and Atlas. American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.
- Rhoads, A.F. and T.A. Block. 2000. The Plants of Pennsylvania: An Illustrated Manual. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.