

Small-whorled Pogonia (*Isotria medeoloides*)

Pennsylvania Endangered Plant Species

State Rank: S1 (critically imperiled), Global Rank: G2G3 (imperiled)

Identification

The small whorled pogonia is a delicate orchid with a stout, upright stem eight to 10 inches high, topped with a whorl of four to six (usually five) leaves. Single or paired yellowish-green flowers, 1-inch long, arise from the center of the leaf whorl. This species is most clearly distinguished from the more common *I. verticillata* (large whorled pogonia) by the shape of the sepals. Sepals in the small whorled pogonia are greenish, not spreading, and are less than an inch long. The large whorled pogonia has widely spreading, purplish sepals, 1 1/4 to 2 1/2 inches long.

Biology-Natural History

The small whorled pogonia is a member of the Orchid Family (*Orchidaceae*). Both *Isotria* species are perennials found only in the Eastern United States. *I. medeoloides* is very sparsely distributed from southern Ontario, Canada and Maine, south to Georgia and west to Illinois. Within this region, only 12 of the 17 states which have historically recorded plant sites, are known to still have them. This species is noted for long periods of dormancy, such that colonies often fluctuate in apparent size from year to year. Plants bloom in May and June.

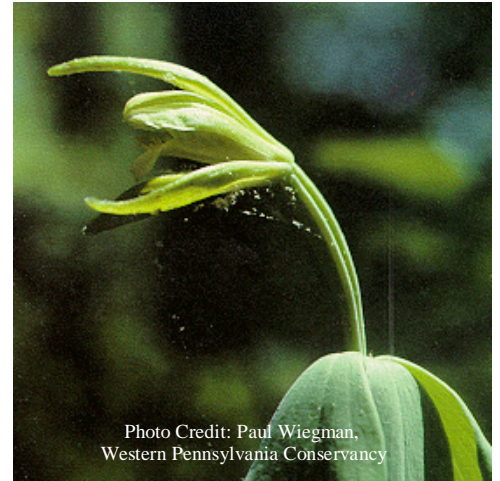
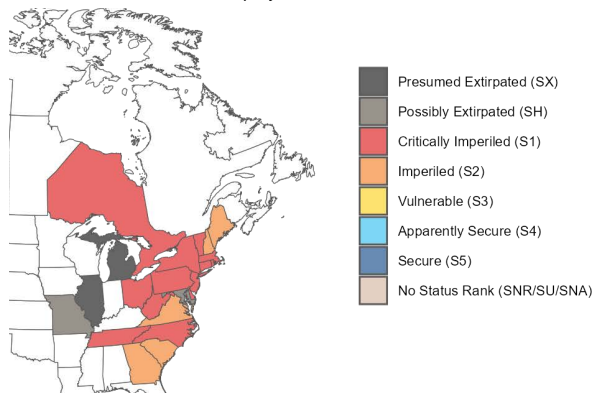


Photo Credit: Paul Wiegman,
Western Pennsylvania Conservancy

North American State/Province Conservation Status

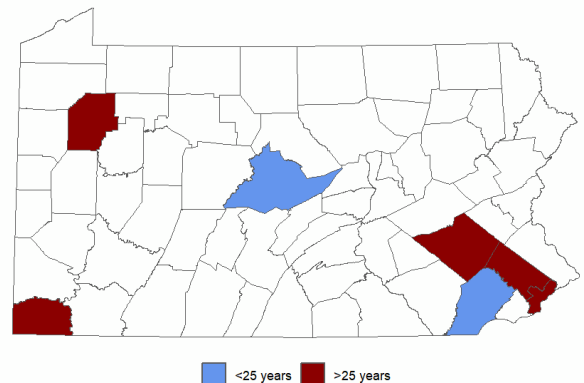
Map by NatureServe 2025



Habitat

Nearly all small whorled pogonia populations occur in second growth or relatively mature forests. Pennsylvania populations seem to be most abundant on dry east or southeast facing hillsides in mixed oak forests. The soils are generally rocky and somewhat acidic.

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Reasons for Being Endangered

The small whorled pogonia is considered our rarest orchid. Only three populations are known in Pennsylvania. Data collected by The Nature Conservancy in 1985 show that approximately 52 populations existed from Ontario to South Carolina. The main threats to this endangered orchid are collecting and habitat alteration.

Management Programs

The small whorled pogonia has been listed as a federal endangered species since 1982. Inventory, monitoring, and protection work initiated by the Western Pa. Conservancy, will be continued through the use of federal endangered species funds. Plants located on public land will be protected by the managing agency.

References:

- NatureServe. 2025. NatureServe Explorer [web application] NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available at <https://explorer.natureserve.org> (Accessed: May 8, 2025)

