
Wildflower Spot – September 2012
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

BEECHDROPS

Epifagus virginiana

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This interesting little plant is parasitic on the roots of beech trees where it grows and receives nourishment. Growing 6-18" tall, the many-branched stems are pale brown, usually with fine brown-purple lines. Lacking chlorophyll, the leaves are represented by dry, brownish scales. Near the top of the stem are ½" long, tubular white flowers, delicately marked with brown-purple stripes. The flowers lower on the stem are tiny and bud-like – never opening, but self-fertilizing and producing abundant seeds. Fruit is a small ¼" brown capsule. Dried stalks often persist under the trees throughout the winter and into spring.

Beechdrops grows in dry woods, under beech trees in every county of Virginia, flowering from September through November. The range extends from Quebec and Nova Scotia to Wisconsin, and south to Florida and Louisiana.

The plant is well-named, *Epifagus* derived from the Greek *epi*, meaning "upon," and *phagos*, "the beech." A tea made from the fresh plant was once used for diarrhea, dysentery, mouth sores



and cold sores. Also known as "cancer root," the plant was used in folk medicine as a cancer remedy, but recent tests for antitumor activity proved negative. ❖

Photo: Beechdrops (*Epifagus virginiana*) taken by Phillip Merritt
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.