
Wildflower Spot – June 2016
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

CLIMBING HYDRANGEA

Decumaria barbara

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

This handsome woody vine needs a climbing surface, without which it does not produce flowers. Like Trumpet Creeper and Climbing Euonymus, adventitious roots readily cling to tree bark, stone walls and fences. A high climber, the stems can reach over 60 feet in height. The opposite leaves are oval, usually toothed, glossy above, and deciduous. Blooming May through June, the numerous fragrant white flowers bear 7-10 petals and 20-30 stamens. From July through October this vine produces fruit capsules shaped like tops and strongly ribbed. In the winter, Climbing Hydrangea is often conspicuous with its clusters of dark fruits hanging from a bare stem clinging high on the trunk of a tree.

Climbing Hydrangea prefers partial shade in swamps, wet woods and moist forests. Occurring only in the southeast counties of Virginia, this vine extends to Florida, west to Louisiana and Texas, and to some mountainous habitats of South Carolina and Tennessee.

The Hydrangea Family is represented in Virginia by only 3 genera. Mock Orange (*Philadelphus*) is a shrub (native and introduced) of mountainous regions, and an occasional cultivated escape elsewhere. The genus *Decumaria* has only two species, Climbing Hydrangea that is native to eastern North America, and another

species of eastern Asia. Such a startling distribution, seen also in hickories, tulip-trees, sassafras and many other plants, reflects massive geological and climatic changes and extinctions over millions of years.

The third genus includes the native Wild Hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*) that grows all over Virginia, and attracts bees, birds and butterflies. Many beautiful cultivars are sold in garden centers but they are usually sterile and do not offer food for pollinating insects. ❖

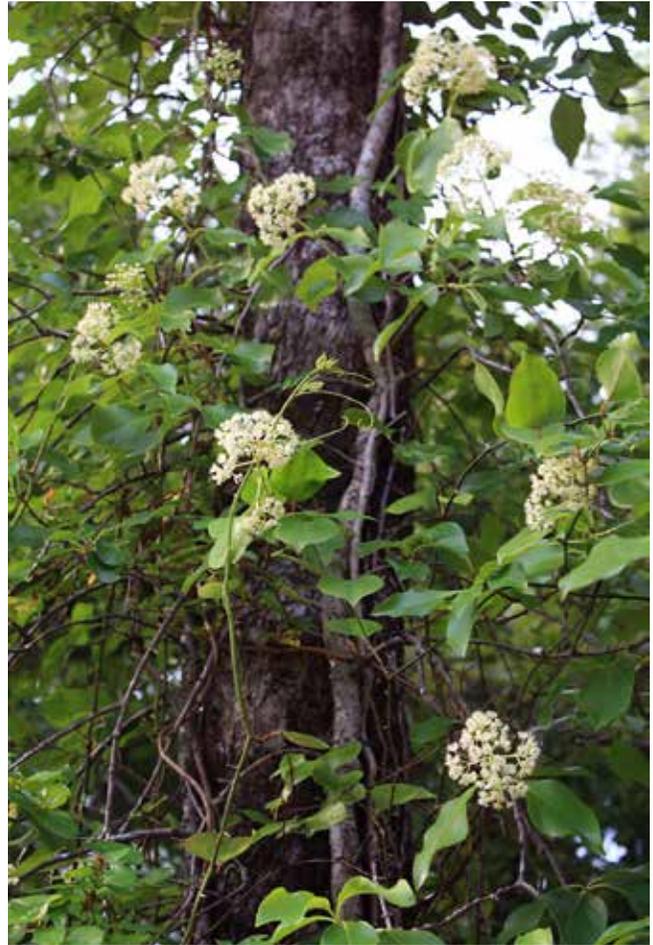


Photo: Climbing Hydrangea (*Decumaria barbara*) taken by Phillip Merritt
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