

Rare Pinelands plant species threatened by everything from new construction to poachers and ATVs

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By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, September 14, 2010

BERKELEY TOWNSHIP - Stooped over a patch of chigger-infested weeds, Emile DeVito found his treasure.

DeVito, 52, a botanist with the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, had just located a hoard of tiny vines called Pickering's morning glory, which he is trying to save from extinction deep in the Pine Barrens.

This sandy wild garden - kept secret to deter poachers and vandals - had 21 percent more mature vines this year, according to his count Monday.

That was good news, since this tiny patch of sand represents the plant's stronghold in the sprawling Pinelands National Reserve. Pickering's morning glory is one of 92 threatened or endangered plants found in this pine and fern forest. Native plants in the Pine Barrens have sustained generations of local residents - known as Pineys - providing everything from cold remedies to salves for gunshot wounds. But the plants are under increasing pressure from human encroachment.

"I'm not going to tell you mankind will lose something if the morning glory winks out of existence," DeVito said. "But this is a real signature of the Pine Barrens. If it goes, what is left? It becomes just any old place."

New construction, the popularity of all-terrain vehicles and the occasional rare-plant collector make the morning glory's future uncertain, said Carleton Montgomery, director of the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

Lawn fertilizers from surrounding neighborhoods flow into the watershed, giving non-native species an advantage over local plants accustomed to its nutrient-poor soils.

And scientists who study the Pinelands occasionally find evidence that poachers who collect rare plants have snatched specimens.

"We know it's happening, but we don't know how extensive it is," Montgomery said. "On public land, collecting plants is illegal without a permit."

"You'd be surprised by how scoured over the Pine Barrens is by plant enthusiasts," DeVito said.

On Monday, he and Theresa Lettman, also with the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, drove down a sandy road so rutted by all-terrain vehicles that it resembled a motocross mogul. At an unmarked spot, DeVito began tromping through the woods, looking for an overgrown trail that led to the plants. He scared up a Cooper's hawk that was probably hunting the ample warblers that chirped in the trees.

After a few false starts and dead ends, he found what he was looking for - a small clearing in the trees with exposed sand that made an ideal home for the plant.

Environmentalists several years ago stretched heavy cable covered in corrugated plastic around the small garden to keep off-road vehicles away. Natural cover helps to conceal the small clearing from the heavily traveled sand road.

"All it would take is one rider to decide to spin donuts in this clearing and it's over," DeVito said.

DeVito, a member of the New Jersey Science Advisory Board, has been tromping through these pine forests and scrub for 20 years in search of rare plants, intensely studying Pickering's morning glory for the last three.

The low-growing vine looks wholly unremarkable as it snakes across the sand, with seed pods sticking up like tiny periscopes. In the early summer, it boasts delicate white flowers shaped like five-pointed stars.

DeVito marked off a grid in the small clearing and began the meticulous chore of counting the plants, dividing them into seedlings, flowering plants and non-flowering. In an hour, he and Lettman found 451 plants, about 60 fewer than last year. But most of last year's plants were seedlings that were in fierce competition with each other for coveted space in the sun.

DeVito wants to get permission from the state Department of Environmental Protection to manage this garden, keeping it shade-free and clear of encroaching grass to give the flowers a chance.

The Pine Barrens is a foreboding place, home to timber rattlesnakes, menacing ticks and distressing chiggers that keep many people away. But it also has some of the state's most beautiful

flowers, including 27 kinds of orchids, and two plants - bog asphodel and Knieskern's beaked rush - found nowhere else on Earth.

The region is a geographical crossroads, too, home to 109 plants at its northernmost reaches and 14 others at its southernmost, said Paul Leakan, spokesman for the Pinelands Commission, the agency that regulates development.

Most of its plants are dependent on forest fires, either to help germinate their seeds or to open woods to new growth.

Here, nature is turned on its head. These woods are full of carnivorous plants, such as the sundew and bladderwort, that suck the juices out of hapless flies and spiders.

Pine Barrens lore is rife with uses for herbal medicines, said Russell Juelg, director of outreach for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

People harvested the abundant sphagnum moss to apply to open wounds, he said.

"It has antiseptic properties, so it was used as bandaging during the Civil War," he said.

Through the 1800s, sassafras and teaberry were shipped to Europe, where the roots or leaves were steeped in hot water like tea for use as a cure-all.

Some locals still make drinks from pine needles, he said.

"It has a little citrus flavor and aroma," Juelg said. "You sweeten it with a little honey. It's full of Vitamin A and Vitamin C."

The Pinelands is valuable largely because of its vast repository of plants, he said.

"I think the defining characteristic of the Pine Barrens is primarily the vegetation," he said.

Juelg said DeVito's efforts are appreciated.

"He has researched this plant more than anyone I know," Juelg said. "A lot of these populations he's studied, it turns out just need some simple nuts-and-bolts protective strategies."

Before leaving the woods, DeVito paused on the sand road and began trilling like a screech owl. A few seconds later, the trees filled with alarmed warblers and chickadees, some of which came within arm's reach of the botanist.

He smiled with satisfaction.

"Some people want to accumulate a lot of wealth. I just want to save these plants for my grandchildren," he said.

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