

SWEET PINESAP, PYGMY PIPES

Monotropsis odorata

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This diminutive (1-4 in. tall) member of the heath family has no chlorophyll at all and is parasitic on soil fungi. Sweet pinesap is a relative of Indian pipes and pinesap, which are in the related genus *Monotropa*. In contrast to *Monotropa*, the petals of *Monotropsis* are fused together to form a cup-like flower (instead of being separate) and the fruit is a fleshy berry (instead of a dry capsule).

Sweet pinesap flowers twice each year, spring and fall. In our area, March/April and October/November are the best times to look for it on upland slopes or in flatwoods (under pine or hardwoods), especially in places where other members of the heath family, such as blueberries and wild azaleas, also grow. A search for sweet pinesap is greatly aided by a good sense of smell. The nodding cluster of several light rose to purple-brown flowers exudes a strong fragrance that can lead you to a plant hidden in the leaf litter. Some describe the fragrance as like violets; others as like cinnamon, nutmeg, or cloves.

Studies of the reproductive biology of sweet pinesap are being conducted in large populations located in Kentucky and Tennessee. Since habitat destruction is threatening this plant, it is hoped that information about pollinators will help its survival.



Sweet pinesap is on the Plant Watchlist of the Virginia Division of Natural Heritage, but it may not be as rare as it seems. It has a wide range in the eastern U.S. but to date it has been found in only 18 counties in Virginia, possibly because it is tiny and easily overlooked. In the coastal plain it is recorded only for James City, York, and Northumberland counties. So, when you are out walking in pine woods, near blueberries and azaleas, be alert for the strong spicy smell that indicates the presence of sweet pinesap hidden under leaf litter. Contact Donna Ware, John Clayton Chapter, Virginia Native Plant Society, so she can report a new county record for this plant!❖